Popular Music Monitors
Article by François Ribac[1]

What do we mean by a Monitor?

Once or twice per week I go swimming for half-an-hour at our local swimming pool. More often than not, the large 25m pool is split into two. On one side, a space dedicated to ordinary visitors (like me) and, on the other side, three lanes reserved for members of the local swimming club. As I'm doing my lengths, my attention is almost always drawn to this part of the pool where an extrovert of a swimming instructor thunders out encouragements and admonishments to members of the club. In general, he walks up and down the length of the pool and, all the while talking to the swimmers, is showing them the movements that they are making in the water as well as how to correct them. What always fascinates me is how the instructor manages to simulate swimming movements whilst standing on dry ground, and the immediate impact this has on the swimmers. In fact, the instructor is acting as a mirror, a memory aid and an (occasionally implacable) advisor all at the same time. He thus enables the swimming club members to become more aware of their bodies and to find new sensations. Strictly speaking, monitors help athletes to think about what they are doing, particularly before and after the session or the exercise.

We have all experienced this relationship with a monitor, particularly in learning situations : when we have learned to walk, then talk, at driving school, during lessons in music, yoga dance school, at a gym etc. In the two latter cases, instructors use mirrors, which give both them and learnersɢ the possibility to watch themselves in real time, and consequently to look at themselves from angles which their body would prevent them seeing under normal circumstances. This makes for a fascinating collaboration, as instructors, the mirror and learners all contribute to the learning process.

When we refer to monitors, some of us may think of small TVs. One of these is now actually set up in front of the raised chair, from which lifeguards monitor bathers. Just as with the dancers' mirror, the monitor/tv completes the lifeguard's role, allowing him to keep an eye on remote areas of the pool and to recharge his level of vigilance if he momentarily loses his concentration (it's hard to concentrate for hours on end when sitting still). If an accident happens in one of the pools, the security commission watch recordings made by surveillance cameras, not only to determine those responsible, but also to inform any new preventative measures to optimise user safety. In this case too the monitor is useful both in real and in delayed time.

In summary, all sorts of monitoring (by humans, machines or a combination of the two) help us to better understand the world and - to use an expression dear to sportspeople - to surpass our limits.

Gramophones as Lifeguards

From its appearance in 1877, gramophones - recording machines as well as music players - have well-documented music and have allowed us to 'monitor' (or playback) music.

Firstly, it has become possible to capture and to playback music which before we could only experience as it was played. In other words, recording has allowed us to build a music heritage, which includes those who play from written parts.

Secondly, recording has given access to repertoires which were not accessible to the place or at the time where we live, thereby opening up the possibility of discovering (and of becoming totally taken with) whole new worlds of other people's music.

From this, spools, then recorded discs have allowed listeners to get to know new repertoires, to identify details in the interpretation and generally to compare recordings or recorded music with live performance.

To say this in another way : it has become possible to soak up and to take pleasure in music at will, at any chosen time and without necessarily being able to play an instrument.

Fourthly, and as a consequence of the points made above, the distribution of recorded media has supported the creation of communities of interest (i.e. fanclubs for artists and groups like Caruso, The Beatles,

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Madonna, DJ's, rock bands etc..) that either meet in chosen locations (apartments, shops, concerts, local meeting rooms etc.) and/or communication networks (live radio shows or web-based forums).

The gramophone and its successors has effectively enabled us to think about music in a different way and to develop our capacity as listeners. Those who set mechanised methods in opposition to the authenticity of the live experience, evoking the impersonal, cold nature of discs, are forgetting the intractable link between these two extremes and, more generally, performance and recording. That which is true for listeners, is also true for musicians, and especially across the multiple galaxies of popular music. Let's take a few examples.

In 2001, Gary Gibbins published a biography of the crooner Bing Crosby (1903-1977). On reading the book, we find that, from a very early age, Crosby started singing along to the radio, a common appliance in 1920's American households. He used the radio to learn songs and also to provide the accompaniment to his singing. Once his singing had reached a fairly good standard and he felt that he had found his vocation, he started a group with some fellow university students. A little later on, came the opportunity for his first public engagement on a show featuring a range of artists, stimulating his love of performing and setting him on track for his immense stage career.

Let's move on to 1950's England when Paul McCartney, Keith Richards and thousands of others were discovering the brilliant rock'n'roll and rhythm'n'blues records coming over from the States. What happens next? They are given a guitar and a 'Dansette' (a small portable Decca record player), and spend entire days in their rooms copying Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, Elvis Presley. If they can't make out what their idols are playing, they slow down the turntable in order to better distinguish the guitar part until they can replicate it perfectly. Thanks to the Dansette, they have the added bonus of being able to be accompanied by Chuck Berry and his whole orchestra in their bedroom! In this way, way beyond the guitar and singing basics, Paul and Keith are to acquire the vocabulary of rock'n'roll. Riding this wave, they very soon start to write their own songs, though not in the same way as their idols; for example Paul integrates liverpudlian characteristics, such as the strong Irish vocal influence, whereas Keith transforms some of Chuck Berry's solos into amazing riffs. The next step, just as for millions who didn't turn professional, Keith and Paul meet other fans of American rock'n'roll records – Mick Jagger for one, John Lennon and George Harrison for the other – and form bands. As soon as they are able to, these bands buy a tape recorder for recording their ideas and their music. Once they sign a record contract they quickly stop recording other people's songs and start to focus on their own compositions in agreement with their label. We're now a few years down the line at around 1965-6 when they arrive in the studio with some disparate ideas – perhaps a chorus, a riff, rhythm lines and the basis for an impro section – position themselves by their microphones and start to weave. They put right mistakes, improvise collectively, make three different versions, chat with their technicians, run with an unexpected idea and slowly the song takes shape. Godard's 1969 film 'One + One' in which we witness the Rolling Stones write "Sympathy for the Devil" is very conscious of this type of "rock'n'roll workshop" situation, which today is found in home studios all over the world.

From the Provision of State Education to Performance

Indeed, CD's, other electronic listening devices, software such as Cubase and media channels like YouTube have now become popular music instructors, who – like swimming instructors or dancers' mirrors – guide apprentices through their first forays into rock, techno, hip-hop, world music, or any mix of these styles. These devices and media are able to provide feedback on what musicians' produce and how best to improve on their creations. Thanks to these exchanges, pop musicians can shape their songs step by step and improvise on top of recorded tracks, just as they would in rehearsal with a band. With the help of this support, and again as in the pool, amateurs pass through the stage of copying technique to becoming inventors in their own right, creating their own channels. This is precisely what gives popular music its own specific character - this use of technology and recorded repertoires, the fact that commercially-available objects become instruments for cultural learning, yet many of those who use them remain, themselves, unaware of the influence these machines have in terms of directing their learning.

Since the early 1970's, another way in which recorded music and associated technology has increased its reach is how decks have become instruments and dj's play venues and public spaces way beyond the confines of their bedrooms, making performance art out of playing disks or records. DJ's and scratch artists use recorded music and samples as ready materials from which to create new compositions and performances. Subsequently this principle was mainstreamed with the dawn of techno (which is known as house music for a good reason). From this time forward, sounds generated by technology became ever present across clubs and performance scenarios as well as having such a central role in the making of popular music. It follows that the mixing of styles and genres no longer stemmed just from a variety of 27

musical influences – a process we described up until very recently - but also became a deliberate process using samplers, software, decks and tape recorders to mix existing pieces of music. The flexibility provided by digital files and the easy ways of transferring and sharing them via USB or internet all add to the ease of this process. Over and above these specific processes, the mainstreaming of recording techniques is so prevalent, that those who continue to resist or oppose them, often are just not seeing what is in front of their eyes. Ask any concert promoter who is advocating the superiority of live performances, where his feedback comes from : soundboards, sound engineers, sound fed back from the drums. All of that is part of studio production!! Teenagers used to play vinyls in their bedrooms, and soundboards used to belong in recording studios; now private amateur activities in confined spaces lead to public pop music performances – a transfer from private to public space.

How Should we Take a Lead on Public Policy?

From 2005-2007, I led a research project in the outskirts of Paris - Les Yvelines and Seine-Saint-Denis - and in Nantes to ascertain the way in which musicians born in the 1980's learned music. I was to find the same methods which I have briefly outlined above : heavy usage of tape recorders, copying idols, a common love of recordings leading to forming bands, stretching limits of sound and then ambitious and passionate young artists creating their own music. In the age of internet, it became clear to me that this generation depended more on online collaborations, using chatrooms, social networks and websites for identifying common points of interest, and that they used TV, radio and media channels to source the music which their predecessors sought out on vinyl. However, this study also revealed how people born into poorer families, in many cases these being immigrant families, neither had access to electronic devices nor to internet connections at that time. In other words, even though libraries were offering them good quality CD's, they didn't possess the means to listen to them. So, as well as local authorities offering rehearsal space, some rap artists needed an internet connection and computer so they could set their backing instrumentals, write their music and open up a Myspace or web platform. In other words, whatever qualities it may have had, the publicly-funded programmes were still discriminating against those with fewest resources, or to put it another way, were concentrating spend on buildings, such as concert venues, rehearsal studios, resource centres and libraries, and prioritising the production of so-called high quality content. Just as in Bing Crosby's time, so we're talking well before the digital era, nowadays equipment for making pop music is found in at least as many bedrooms as venues, and access to sound recording instruments is just as important as access to repertoires. Given the fact that web and media-users are using media as a form of self-expression and a way to form new communities of interest, rather than being an end in itself, public policy should wake up to the rich potential here and provide support, which caters for the inequality of access to these tools, and should stop ignoring them or, what is worse still, seeing them as threatening.

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