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'It's mostly an accompaniment to something'

Music Streaming and the Hastening of Audio as Background

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.3040>



[Vol. 27 No. 2 \(2024\): audio](#)

Articles

Introduction

Music streaming represents a highly personalised, portable technology that enables a ubiquitous listening quality and transforms the relationship people have with music. It has implications for how music recordings can be engaged with and what people sense they can do with music. Streaming therefore expands the ability of users to inflect music audio across everyday life (DeNora 63), contributing to advancements in playback audio technologies that disarticulate performance spaces from listening contexts (Nowak and Bennett 53). Furthermore, they afford

convenient, ostensibly inexpensive, and various opportunities to sort and organise music recordings while also enabling users to engage in personalised recommendations (Lüders 2342).

Crucially, though, streaming services extend listening as a secondary activity (Lüders 2351) in which users of these technologies “listen alongside” (Drott 257) and situate music with other everyday activities. In other words, streaming services afford users the capacity to render music listening as a secondary or background activity, with “backgroundness” now a highly apparent component of streaming cultures (Hagen 238). In this article, I investigate and focus on this background quality. While not representing the only way listeners experience acts of listening while using these services, this quality of music in the background now appears firmly etched into the experiences of many users of streaming services.

However, music as placed in the background is far from new. The products and the wider historical influence of the Muzak Corporation and others point to a broader use of environmental mood music that strips distinctive aural qualities to ensure it is neither too exciting nor sedate (Sterne 30). In such cases, wired radio or piped music (Lanza) is typically transmitted to supermarkets, shopping centres, elevators, public lavatories, and other semi-public commercial spaces that explicitly avoid drawing attention to the music provided (Zerubavel 19). But background music as facilitated and adopted by users of music streaming differs in some important respects: first, it is music that is typically privatised and configured in important ways by users; and second, it is provided through streaming platforms that now focus on personalisation and prediction for the user, thereby “giving listeners exactly what they want, and what they don’t yet know they want” (Prey 3). These qualities afford users the ability to place music in the background as a seemingly valued secondary activity.

Streaming platforms therefore do not merely adapt to existing listening habits but actively work to frame and encourage users to adopt instrumentalised relations with music. In this sense, they can render the experience of listening to music as less of a singularly focussed activity (on the music in question), but one that partners and designates music in acts of self-care and regulation (Drott 167). Streaming services therefore importantly provide users with an increasing way to adopt music audio as a background accompaniment in navigating the everyday. They offer recommendations that suit an array of situations, and this is reflected in the perceptions of users who draw increasingly on music as a social resource.

How do users experience using these audio technologies and the way platforms cater to the user’s context? And when exploring the experiences of using streaming services, in what ways might the audio provided enable or even induce listening in the background? To explore these ideas, I draw on in-depth interviews with users of music streaming services. Conducted in late 2021, these interviews were used to further understand how people used and integrated music streaming technologies. One main theme from the larger project (see Walsh, *Streaming Sounds*) is presented in this article to consider how streaming enables and potentially compels the use of music as background audio. I consider how these technologies inflect music as an increasingly secondary, or background dimension. Importantly, some users indicate that this capacity represents a considerable resource in managing everyday tasks and interactions, while others imply a more ambivalent view about the increased presence of music in the background.

Streaming as Background Audio

Streaming services enable users to partner recordings of music throughout their everyday lives and with the express purpose of placing audio in the background. Charlotte (pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of participants) describes this when comparing her use of streaming to earlier formats. In her words,

going back to the old days of Vinyl, you had to turn the record over and with CDs you had to change the CD. If I have friends over for dinner and I want music on in the background the streaming service allows me to choose something that will last the entire evening... . You used to buy multiple 6 CD sets, which still required you to change a CD, but I can now access that 6 CD set as a stream of music that doesn't require my attention. So, it becomes easier to have background music that you enjoy, what my uncle used to call wallpaper music. So, it's music that you don't have to interact with to keep it going.

In mentioning the idea of wallpaper music, Charlotte suggests that streaming assists her in auditorily furnishing dining with music. This compelling observation resonates with Erik Satie's notion of furniture music, which when translated from the French—*musique d'ameublement*—means furnishing music, or “music which would be part of the noises around it and would take account of them” (Orledge 74). While Satie's furniture music speaks to musical performances that respond and blend into the auditory atmosphere of a restaurant, streaming services now also offer a similar capacity that provides recorded music that is tuneful without overpowering or making itself obtrusive (Orledge 74). Others similarly describe the way these technologies now allow users to listen more ambiently. In this case, users like Elliot incorporate music into a variety of everyday activities which renders it continually present. Responding to a question about how streaming has changed the way he engages with music, Elliot replies:

yeah, I definitely think so. I probably engage with it [music] a lot more than I did before streaming was invented because, again, you only really listened to the radio when you were going to and from somewhere, or listened to a CD if you were driving. But now I use it [streaming] like constantly, when I'm studying or if I'm cooking or cleaning, it's constantly there.

The idea that music recorded now can be perennial and blended into everyday activities is one dimension that streaming services enable. Crucially, though, while playing a role to auditorily furnish everyday activities, this is not a primary role but one that is rendered as part of the contextual environment. Music streaming services enable a configuration of music recordings to become present, but in a way that does not dominate one's focus, while simultaneously acting as a companion used to dynamically enhance and shape moods (Hagen 238). Participants like Amanda reinforce this; in response to a question about whether she felt music streaming altered the way she engages with music, she suggests:

Amanda: Yeah, because I never would've used music so much in a day. Like music has almost integrated into every part of my life, and it's kind of scary.

Interviewer: Scary? Why would you say that?

Amanda: Well because I think it's important to just sit and listen to nothing ... because it's losing the value of ... like just quiet. And also, my hearing, like if the volume of music, not the literal volume hasn't changed but people in the '80s used to listen to live concerts all the time, but the prolonged exposure to music is what actually creates auditory problems.

In considering the notion that streaming services have become embedded in everyday life, Amanda speaks of how streaming has seemingly altered her relationship with music. She reflects ambivalently on the quantity of her listening and how this may have meant she has lost the value of being able to listen to nothing, with music recordings perennially being heard. She also articulates concern about the physiological health of her hearing, given the way music audio has seemingly insinuated itself across many of her everyday experiences. This perception that streaming now caters widely to various situations that can also blend into the background is echoed by other participants. For example, in reflecting on the use of her music streaming, Sophie describes her tendency to use the service in two ways:

Question: Could you tell me about the types of music you listen to and how you engage with music streaming services in general?

Sophie: So, I'm definitely a pop princess. I listen to mostly pop ... to be honest, I think like a lot of people my age, I tend to focus on music that I first listened to in my teenage high school years. So, a lot of what I listen to is from the early 2000s, yeah, kind of pop range. I think I also listen to quite a lot of music while I work. And that stuff is not pop, because I can't concentrate [with pop]. So, I would use playlists and things like that that I like for reading and chill out. So, music that doesn't have any lyrics or things like that or any noticeable riffs in them. Just things that are calm and I can have it as background music so that I'm not distracted by all the things in the office and things like that. They'd be the two main ways that I listen.

Sophie describes her use of streaming services as falling into two variants: first, a more animated and potentially nostalgic type of listening mode associated with her engagement with popular music; then second, another modality that is used to assist in her completion of work and relaxation. Music streaming in this second guise is connected to the use of music as a background or ecological feature. As Tacchi (32) suggests earlier of radio, it can provide unfocussed sounds that afford an environment that is reassuring while also one that does not demand nor distract from the task at hand. This experience is also suggested by other participants who, along with the idea of placing music in the background, suggest that streaming interfaces themselves appear to induce users to use the service in the pursuit of accompanying other activities. Consider Damien's experience:

maybe it's the interface, it just makes me want to choose something faster. I feel pressured, I don't know why (laughs). And I guess because a lot of the time when I'm streaming, I'm doing it to accompany another activity, like if I'm going for a run or I'm cleaning or something. So, I'm not sitting down to listen to music. So, I guess that's the difference for me. Unlike choosing a movie, sitting down to choose a movie, I'm trying to find something to have on in the background. And I guess that's kind of changed the way I listen to music as well because, yeah, now it's, it's mostly an accompaniment to something.

Damien draws music into his everyday life in a way that speaks to how streaming services afford a musical accompaniment "in the background". As streaming platforms require users to navigate interfaces to access ever-expandable depositories of music (Besseny 3), they can also convey a sense of urgency in selecting music that can be used as an accompaniment to other activities. This perception of streaming services as rendering music as background was evident too for

Anita, who describes how the social features associated with streaming contrast with earlier music formats:

for me it might be that it [music streaming] changed how you interact with music but also the social aspect of music. It's become so ubiquitous and so ambient that it's taken away the specialness a little bit. I remember a time when people would get together and listen to the CDs that they bought Now, you would send a YouTube video or music to somebody, and they'd listen. But it doesn't have the same kind of social, celebratory aspect to it. It has made life a lot nicer in some ways, but it has also created a different kind of connection.

Anita articulates how the reception of music facilitated by streaming services, along with other social media platforms, appears to render the experience less collective and reduces its "specialness". As Drott (167) argues, music listening in this case represents an experience that is less focussed on the music itself and renders it more ambient or ubiquitous. This is indicative of how music streaming appears to have assumed a niche for some users that enables music as an audio accompaniment in the background, which could also undermine user awareness of the artists, albums, and musicians that they stream (Nag 28). For example, Natalia in response to a question about whether she listens directly to artists or if her relationship with music has changed, indicates:

no, I don't [listen to artists] you know. I think there might have been one point in my life when I did. But these days you know, I'm pretty much purely using streaming services so it's easy to press like, "Oh, you know what I like. Just play what I like" and then it just sort of does its own thing and then you don't really ... I think you don't have that relationship, that kind of I guess direct relationship as in who's this, what is this [the music recording] kind of thing. Do you know what I mean? It's more sort of a background rather than a conscious, "Who is this? What album is it from?"

This awareness of how her relationship with music has changed is revealing. It suggests that Natalia perceives streaming as a background accompaniment that furthermore corresponds with a diminished awareness of the musicians she listens to via streaming technologies. Damien also implies a similar occurrence when suggesting, in response to a question about what musicians are listed on his year-in-review playlist, that

I wouldn't be able to name ... any song from those playlists despite the hundreds of hours I've spent listening to them. Like, I would recognise them [aurally], but I wouldn't, yeah, I wouldn't know the artist or any... Like it's just a different space.

Music streaming, therefore, facilitates music listening in a way that increases its presence throughout everyday life, but in a way that simultaneously renders it less primary, thereby ensuring its place in the background. As Louise explains:

I think it has made it easier for me to have it [music] as a part of a soundtrack to my life, a part of what I do. Because it's just so integrated... I mean, with technology it just allows things to be just so simplified for us that we can just access music at a click of the finger. I think that therefore music is much easier for me to have it kind of flowing through.

The idea that music streaming affords an ambient quality that flows through everyday life, alongside a user's everyday activities, is suggestive of one quality that arguably has been extended by streaming cultures. It also is suggestive of how these services are designed to capture users, secure their attention, and increase “engagement” (Seaver 428)—albeit while placing music in the background. While convenience and assistance in managing interactions is a hallmark associated with earlier audio playback technologies like MP3 players (Bull), streaming services and their integration into preexisting mobile communication devices, along with the personalised services they provide, offer increasing ways to blend music into the everyday. With the digitalisation, miniaturisation, and now networking afforded by streaming technology, this now allows users to arguably expand what can be done with music in the pursuit of managing and inflecting various social contexts through the introduction of music recordings (Walsh, “I'm also”). As Theresa—a self-described devoted collector of vinyl—explains, her preferred music format was streaming, despite expressing the important relationship she (elsewhere in our interview) admits feeling towards her vinyl collection:

oh for convenience, streaming is so much easier. I mean, you can create playlists. You can explore different artists that you wouldn't normally listen to. And you can look up a list of top 500 albums and you can tick off which ones you like and explore in that way. I think in order to listen to vinyl I have to kind of have free time where I'm able to sit down and just not have anything else going on. Whereas streaming I can be cooking or, you know, jogging or in the car. So, it's like music on the go, if you will. It might sound very clichéd but it's—it's just so much easier. But you just don't have the quality if you're into that.

Even for users like Theresa—who engage with multiple formats to listen to music in various ways—streaming appears as an important secondary activity that assumes a part of how she describes her preference for listening and incorporating music.

Conclusion

While not the only way listeners use these technologies, a secondary or background mode that offers a personalised and responsive auditory accompaniment to the individual's circumstances now appears to be a shared experience for users of music streaming services. The accounts and descriptions provided by users presented in this article indicate that music as background audio represents a dimension of streaming cultures that appears highly evident. It allows these users to furnish their social world with forms of aesthetic output (DeNora 74). However, the expansion of background music facilitated by streaming services can be perceived by some users as undercutting music as an autotelic aesthetic experience. Consequently, for these users, the increasing role that music streaming plays in mediating music throughout everyday life can be also tinged with feelings of nostalgic unease or ambivalence. Nonetheless, music platforms now offer personalised music that is configured to explicitly allow users to listen alongside and integrate music with their everyday activities. It is this background quality, discernible in these accounts, that is of significance in that it represents an important way that users describe their relationship to and use of music streaming technologies.

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