Listening to Mediation: Digital Noise in a Post-High-Fidelity Age

Dr. Greg Hainge
School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies
University of Queensland
Brisbane, 4072
Australia
www.geocities.com/ghainge/

Abstract

Starting with a brief examination of the history of high-fidelity audio reproduction, this paper will firstly trace the intended erasure of the medium that audio technology seems to bring about. Indeed, it will be suggested that histories of high-fidelity reproduction seem to run counter to most histories of representation in which the medium is rendered increasingly opaque as the architecture of representation itself crumbles. Rather, high-fidelity reproduction would seem to run parallel with another history of the Twentieth Century, namely the history of noise abatement.

It will be suggested, however, that the attainment of what would appear to be the apex of high-fidelity reproduction with the onset of the digital era does not, in fact, mark the end of this historiography and that, rather, a shift has taken place. Examining Sterne's (2003) analyses of early phonograph advertisements and comparing them to a recent print advertisement for Bose® QuietComfort® 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling® headphones, it will be suggested that in the digital era a shift has taken place that complicates the high-fidelity ideal driving audio technology throughout most of the Twentieth Century.

This ideal is complicated further still in the musical genre known as glitch, a musical genre absolutely dependent on its medium in spite of its similarities to other prior analogue musical forms. However, it will be argued that the full extent of this problematisation can only be apprehended through a full analysis of the material ontology of the technology used to create this music—which has not be done up until this point. What this analysis will show is that if digital music appears to surpass all previous standards of high-fidelity reproduction, it does so only because it displaces a human perceptive faculty into the technological apparatus itself. Glitch music in the final analysis then shows the extent to which the digital is in fact far noisier than the analog.

Whilst associated with computer music, however, glitch music is often in the first instance produced not with computers per se but, rather, with compact disc players. Finally, therefore, some brief comments on the possible ramifications of this analysis for computer music will be examined.

Following the logic of the argument proposed, one might suggest that as a digital form of music production computer music effects a similar shift away from the human into the technological apparatus itself. What this means is not that human intervention is bypassed entirely in computer music, such is obviously not the case, but, rather, that in the production and performance of computer music neither the embodied self of the musician nor the material technological apparatus are present, that the sounds produced are (we might say extrapolating on Barthes' idea) devoid of grain. Such surely would account for the desire to reintroduce the concept of grain into computer music via composition techniques such as granular synthesis (which only works on sound itself and not the medium) and patches which allow counterfeit analogue noise to be grafted on to digital sounds. But neither of these techniques actually heighten our awareness of digital noise, of precisely what this particular compositional and performance medium bring to music, of what the surplus value of the medium itself is. Whilst I do not then believe that it is true that computer music is medium-less, I do believe that we have not yet learned to hear its medium, its noise, in a functional and productive as opposed to dysfunctional mode.