

DOSSIER

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Music Distribution in the Consumer Society: the Creation of Cultural Identities Through Sound

Distribución musical en la sociedad de consumo
La creación de identidades culturales a través del sonido

ABSTRACT

Our behavior is determined by the characteristics of the culture in which we live. Culture imposes on us ways of thinking and perceiving, habits, customs and usages. Music is a form of cultural expression that has a very important role in the social construction of reality. Music has always accompanied man, is one of the oldest rituals of human kind. No one knows exactly how and why the man has started to make music but the music has been a means of perceiving the world, a powerful instrument of knowledge. Traditionally, creation and distribution of music has been tied to the need to communicate feelings and experiences that can not be expressed through common language. This paper describes how our society has generated a multitude of sounds that are distributed freely through the new technologies. This set of sounds is creating cultural identities that are unable to manage his current music and understand their communicative speech. To this end, the paper examines the profound changes that music is experiencing in a consumer society. These changes make it necessary to establish a new paradigm for analysis that allows structuring the diversity of sounds, analyzing their creation, distribution and consumption. Finally, the paper states that permanent contact with the music changes the way we perceive sounds. In contemporary society, music has gone from being a vital need to become an instrument of consumption. This has led to significant changes in their functions, significance and social use.

RESUMEN

Los seres humanos estamos condicionados, en una medida imposible de estimar, por los supuestos de la cultura en que vivimos, y ésta nos impone modos de pensar y de percibir; hábitos, costumbres y usos. La música como forma de expresión cultural siempre ha tenido un papel muy importante en la construcción social de la realidad, es un arte cuyo desarrollo va unido a las condiciones económicas, sociales e históricas de cada sociedad. El presente artículo analiza el papel que tiene la música dentro del universo simbólico de la cultura contemporánea. Para ello centra su estudio en describir cómo nuestra sociedad ha generado multitud de sonidos que se distribuyen libremente a través de los canales establecidos por las nuevas tecnologías permitiendo establecer, a través del proceso de comunicación musical, múltiples identidades culturales que son incapaces de ordenar el discurso musical actual y extraer de él lo que de novedoso pueda presentar. Para ello se analizan los profundos cambios estructurales y simbólicos que está sufriendo la música en la sociedad de consumo y que hacen necesario fijar un nuevo paradigma para su análisis que permita estructurar la diversidad de sonidos de nuestra época, analizar su creación, distribución y consumo. Finalmente, el artículo concluye desarrollando la idea de que hoy, debido al contacto continuo con el hecho musical que se produce en la sociedad contemporánea, ha cambiado nuestra forma de percibir la música; nos hemos acostumbrado a apreciarla como una fuente de placer efímero, a percibirla más como una satisfacción inofensiva que como una necesidad vital.

KEY WORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Music, communication, music production, music distribution, speech sound, cultural identity, consumer society.

Música, comunicación, producción musical, distribución musical, discurso sonoro, identidad cultural, sociedad de consumo.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article, which is part of a broader investigation into the subject, is to determine the characteristics that define today's music as a social phenomenon. Social because understanding it requires an analysis of the uses and functions of music today, and this analysis is only possible from a relationship between the music and the characteristics of the society that created or interpreted it; social because the necessity to produce and listen to music is one of Man's most fundamental activities. This project aims to link the analysis of music in society to the importance that sound in the universe of communication has always had, in order to examine the role of music in relation to the evolution of society today. We emphasise the growth and development of the current music market, analysing audiences and the profile of the individual who consumes music today, as well as the union between the structure of the music and the construction of the symbolic universe. So, the main objective is to join the analysis of consumption and current musical creation to the structure of feeling appropriate to the times we live in.

2. The importance of music in society

Music has always been with us. It is one of the oldest rituals of the human race that reflects and expresses our emotions, passions and feelings (Glowacka Pitet, 2004). We don't know how or why Man started to make music but it is clear that music is a medium through which to perceive the world, a potent instrument of knowledge. It is the language that goes beyond language since it has been traditionally linked to Man's need to communicate feelings and experiences that cannot be expressed through common language. Its communicative power lies in the fact that it can say everything to us without saying anything at all since it is not necessary for it to be a bearer of words or intelligible in order to refer to a world of infinite meanings that can vary with each new interpretation. Daily life does not exist without music; the cultures of the world have succeeded in ordering the noise and creating melodies, rhythms and songs that have played a transcendental role in the development of humanity, from primitive song to the most urban of rhythms like rock, jazz or the blues, all have had important repercussions in the development of society (Hormigos, 2008). So, we start from the idea that music is inherently endowed with the quality of sociability, it is the expression of inner life, of feelings, but it also demands the listener's receptivity and understanding of the style in which it is made as well as knowledge of the society in

which it was created, because each musical work is a set of signs invented during its execution, dictated by the needs of the social context. If we detach the musical signs of the work from the society that created it, these would have different meanings.

Music is an undeniable social fact; it has thousands of social mechanisms, is deeply engrained in the human collective, receives numerous environmental stimuli and in turn creates new relationships between people (Fubini, 2001). The songs and melodies that we carry in our cultural baggage imply specific ideas, meanings, values and functions that intimately relate to the sounds of the cultural fabric that produces them. Historically, music has always been allocated to a specific public conceived as a social group with tastes that are different according to the society we live in. We can therefore see how the very musical practices of our contemporary culture not only reflect symbols and values, but also the rules of social stratification, the technological characteristics of our time and the growing influence of the means of production.

So, we can say that music plays a very important role in our society in terms of cultural declaration; it is communication among individuals, reflecting the culture of which it forms a part. Man expresses himself through cultural forms; in the case of music, he uses a specialized language, different from everyday language, which poses various levels of understanding and allows us to observe the extension of dialogism in modern culture, and also the importance of passion, with its cognitive and contractual dimensions. It symbolizes the general dynamism of the feelings, and contains the most abstract structures of the emotions. Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences offered up by the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to situate ourselves within imaginative cultural stories (Frith, 2003). When it comes to understanding the music, to receiving a message from the notes of a musical instrument or perceiving the meaning of a song, we must be aware that the interactions between the sounds and the individual arise from answers learned, personal guidelines and cultural standards; hence the same song can be interpreted differently depending on the cultural characteristics of the person perceiving it.

Musical structures derive from specific cultural standards; that is why each society classifies sounds according to their functionality, thus we have music for dancing, for sensual pleasure, music that is light, religious, for prayer and consumption, etc. All musical functions are determined by society, so we are only able to know the music and the social movements that

exist around it if we recognize the cultural background in which it was created, since each musical culture has its own peculiarities. It also has fixed procedures for validating the music, for setting the boundary for what is to be included and excluded as part of a genre, or creating labels to help interpret and classify the sound. From this perspective, interest in the musical product itself loses ground to the analysis of the dynamic aspects of the culture that influence musical composition. More attention is paid to the analysis of aspects that lie outside music (function, symbolism, change of attitudes and values, enculturation, etc) which become important when understanding the contemporary universe of sound. In today's society, however, it is very hard to determine music's true place in the world of culture, due to the rise of mass culture which has led to a massification of music in certain genres, much of which of it containing repetitive messages that lack aesthetic or artistic value. It has also caused an incorrect perception of the function performed by music within our cultural universe. It tends too often to be linked to consumption while forgetting that it is really much closer to culture. This has led to a false outlook regarding the idea that Man's need to listen to music is more a leisure or consumer activity than a cultural activity. So, the social interest in music beyond the vision that converts it into a product of exchange within the modern consumer society is lost; and what is ignored is that there is still a fundamental cultural dimension, together with that consumer dimension to which music is exposed to today, that will give meaning to the musical fact. The importance of music must not be measured by the profit earned from its sale but by how the vital experience surrounding it is created and constructed. We can only understand this if we take on a subjective and objective identification with the musical culture of the moment.

The music of contemporary society does not appear from nowhere but is built over time, it is maintained socially and created and experienced individually. So, to better comprehend the role music plays in our society we must look into the dynamic aspects of culture, since here is where we will find those aspects beyond the music that are important for un-

derstanding the universe of sound. Culture is what endows a melody with a specific function that establishes places for its interpretation, which converts a song into a symbol, and marks attitudes and values, etc. Each era has given us a specific musical language that we have transformed in accordance with the rules and values of our society. That music, endowed with specific cultural characteristics, will be perceived according to each person's individual criteria. Therefore, it is necessary to identify how the individual makes and perceives music, to identify the connection of the music to the rest of human behaviour.

The meaning of the music is not only found in the text, that is, in the work of music, but in the performance, in its staging through musical/cultural activity.

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This staging allows us to move from a description of the music to a description of the listener's response and the consideration of the relationship of feeling, truth and identity. We say that music becomes symbolic for a group of individuals and transmits identity when songs or melodies appear with a value that is representative for a human group in a specific time and context. Music always has a strong emotional component which converts the music into a symbol, either because the sounds in that music have been created specifically to become symbolic music or because, with the passing of time and familiarity, a melody or song becomes spontaneously symbolic based on a social availability that gives the music a special value with content that a group can identify. We must bear in mind that this symbolism of music is situational; when taken out of its initial context it loses its capacity to generate identity. To understand how identity is generated via music, the role played by music as an instrument of communication within culture needs to be studied.

3. Communication by music in the contemporary cultural universe

Cultural identity is the place where we find culture as subjectivity, where the community sees itself as subject in a dynamic way within a continuous process. That is, cultural identity is an incessant mediation between tradition and renewal, permanence and transformation, emotion and knowledge. Cultural identity created from the discourse of sound lends meaning to the music; it shows us that it is the ideal vehicle for transmitting the values of culture. Traditionally, we have socialized through music; the desires, values, ideas and beliefs we share have found an outlet for expression via sound. Through particular melodies or

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sounds, we have recognized the social roots of our belonging to a particular culture; these enable us to recognize our past, situate us in a present and project a future. But the feeling of the music as social action is still a subjective phenomenon that depends on receptor activity. Musical reception is preceded by a strategy that plays with the listener's expectations. This action of perception is the feeling of the music and it alone can establish cultural spheres, can be effective as a communication tool and can be social.

Man makes contact with the world via his senses, each of which allows him to know something of his surroundings. Sound becomes a fundamental element in receiving and transmitting information, with this need to perceive the environment through the senses. After speech, music is the most important sound made by Man. It is a structuring of sounds that constitutes an imaginary language with its own expressive value. Music is a fundamental communicative instrument that describes concepts, feelings, places and situations, etc, and so, all cultures have used it as a potent socializing

agent since it has always had a power and decisive educative vocation in the social construction of identities, and cultural and individual styles. The musical discourse consciously lays open its practical dimensions to the point where it involves itself in forms of life with singular conceptions on how we relate to each other and the world. Music is an essential part of our biographical memory; any time in our life can be linked to a type of music, melody or song that helps us to remember, and stays with us from infancy to maturity adding sound to our development in society.

Musical expression is a fundamental pillar of all societies. All human communities have musical expression as a structural and integrating element. Music possesses an important value that derives from the nature of its language and its capacity for communication.

Although the semantic message of the music often seems slight, especially if we refer to music that only has melody, we must understand that aesthetic information is a highly significant field. We can then affirm that music always expresses something, even for those people who do not know its language. Music can evoke, suggest, describe and narrate.

Each musical act generates processes of meaning. The language of music is not that of common speech as it has no conceptual character but, even so, it can also express emotions and feelings. In sound, Man has found an important element for identification since, when he cannot express an idea in his head through common language he turns to a mechanism of expression that is much more powerful, the language of sounds, loaded with specific cultural expressivity.

However, the communicative function of music also depends on the style, taste, artistic labels and training prevalent at the time for its interpretation. Each culture has its own rhythm, and its conscious experience is ordered into cycles of seasonal change, physical growth, economic activity and political upheavals, life and beyond. We could say that the experience of ordinary life takes place in a world in real time. The essential quality of music is its power to create another world in virtual time (Blacking, 2006). It is here where the real communicative power of music lies, communicating something that can be modified with each

new hearing, something that changes to the rhythm of the changes of context, of the changes in society. This characteristic of music arises when the sound becomes material, with its transmission through time/space channels, when the music goes from immediate perception to being distributed through the media, and is recorded and stored in various supports. Then the music is no longer unique but observable, like a temporal product (Moles, 1978). Before the music could be recorded and stored to be turned into sound in any given situation, the melodies only existed as temporal material created by the music of the time. Since the invention of recording, musical language has become stable. Thus, musical communication remains fixed in time for all generations, and takes on new meaning with each interpretation, hence its richness.

Today we cannot question the communicative capacity of music because it operates as a language without being one, and its communicability is developed via observable, measureable and verifiable procedures. But despite this we live in an age where music is used and abused without us caring about its communicative capacity. We have never been so surrounded by music, but it occupies a place on the periphery of our society, its communicative function hidden away. Hence, we have been steadily losing the ability to interpret its real language. Each one of us fixes limits within which sound, perceived as agreeable and satisfactory, informs us of meaning, but outside these limits sound is appreciated as noise and dissonance with no meaning. Today these limits, traditionally established within specific parameters and shared by society, are becoming unfixed. The music lover who likes a certain musical style endows the sounds he hears with meaning in accordance with the expectations the music has aroused in him. Following a specific musical style, musical label, musician or artist conditions us when we receive other types of music because we tend to judge anything new within the reference frameworks we have created as a consequence of our tastes. So, the melodies or songs we listen to will be much more communicative for us the closer they are to that musical standard determined by our personal taste.

Many social practices are already linked to music, and help construct it and give it meaning. Music's most important dimension is its functionality within a specific social context. This belonging to a given cultural scenario generates and determines the communicative role that music has in the life of the individual who belongs to a group with which he shares a symbolic universe, a language, customs, beliefs, etc. It is in this context that the melody or song takes on a shared

social meaning. However, our society has tended towards the mass dissemination of an easy musical discourse that is wiping out traditional musical cultures that existed within the community dimension of music based on collective interpretation.

This music is being substituted by a standard musical model in which the communicative function is increasingly altered and manipulated by an institutional corporate network that has tentacles in technology, the economy and politics (Smiers, 2006). This network designs the components of a mass culture more concerned with effects on the audience and the possibilities of controlling its reactions than with the communicative functions of music. However, what the media defines as music is not the only truth. Alternative musical forms and different means of musical production often coexist with mass musical dimensions, contaminating them and being contaminated by them. We can state that the variety of today's musical expressions is closely linked to the dynamics of social life and is full of symbolic values of an implicit and explicit nature. The music of the postmodern era has no receptors, only users. It serves as a substitute in the I of the song or melody, and not even the I of the music but a kind of empty box at the service of the user who wants to use the melody or song to express his feelings. Following this dynamic, today's music blanks out the meaning so that each of us can fill it with our own ideas (Pardo, 2008).

4. The influence of new forms of distribution on the perception of contemporary music.

Technological changes have brought new forms of socialization of cultural goods, and music is no exception. The creation and reception of music has been greatly transformed by the arrival of new software programs that allow sounds to be created and manipulated with ease, even by those who have no musical training (Roca, 2004). In addition, today's changes in the dissemination of information and the technologies of transmission have greatly increased music distribution worldwide. The Internet has become the great ally of the musical message thanks to new recording and distribution technologies supported in new formats, thus broadening the catalogue of messages that the individual can receive through the mass of available music, and so reopening an old debate about the role of music in the cultural universe. These new forms of distribution developed by the culture of contemporary technology have caused music to become a ubiquitous element subject to a continuous revolution that obliges a constant revision of the paradigms that

try to structure the diversity of modern sounds so as to group together styles, messages, fashions, functions and effects to understand them better. Instead of this, today we find infinite sounds freely distributed across the channels established by the new technologies, allowing the generation of multiple identities constructed within highly diffuse limits and which facilitate an ordering of the current musical discourse that enables us to extract from it whatever is new. All this is altering the perception of music, its communicative capacity, its forms of distribution and control, even the individual's ability to appreciate the current musical discourse. We have gone from musical practices that were the preserve of a specific group to a form of omnivore appropriation of music that consists of listening to a bit of everything. The omnivore is someone who is willing to appreciate all forms of music. However, it is important to differentiate between knowing a musical genre or cultural style and appreciating it as your own, appropriating it to express an identity. This omnivore behaviour of today is best understood as someone who has knowledge rather than affinity (Ariño, 2006).

The loss of physical format (first the tape cassette, then the record and now the CD) has caused a radical maybe even irreversible mutation in music. The format allowed repertoires to be ordered and a specific communicative discourse to be transmitted clearly. In other times, musical fashions were created around it and its transmission enabled the creation of cultural identities. Today we are exposed to a continuous torrent of sounds that do not allow us to make specific sense of the contemporary musical discourse. Thus, postmodern music has been losing its time reference that used to enable it to be understood, and instead has become all-present. With hardly any effort, we continually access melodies and songs that are born and die in no time at all. The immediate, mass availability of free music through the Net is modifying not only the perception of music but also its formulas of reproduction and distribution, even the forms of production. The new digital supports have liberated music from the captivity of the format, inclining more towards automated listening, more passive on the part of the listener who is exposed to continuous music which, while it is true that it extends the range of sounds we can hear, gives the music no time to tell us what it wants to say.

That is why easily digestible music triumphs today, and styles, labels and interpreters go out of fashion faster and faster, leaving no place for more complex music within the social discourse of contemporary consumer society. This is not for lack of quality or

because the ear is not enabled to search out communication and identity in it, but because the current social scenario gives it no space in which to contact the individual who is more accustomed to using music than appreciating the musical discourse. What is important today is the existence of music that is portable, without interruptions and potentially infinite. But this permanence of music goes hand in hand with the obsolescence of each single moment that is part of that continuous sound (Horta, 2008). Today more than ever we have stopped listening to music; now we only hear it. There is no time to take delight in it; current consumer society allows no time to appreciate the musical discourse that it generates. From the painstaking selection of melodies and songs that in another time spoke to us of our musical culture, enabling the generation of cultural identities shared through the discourse of sound, we have arrived at a compulsive accumulation of sound files that say nothing to us. We store more music than we can ever listen to or appreciate, leaving to one side the need to identify ourselves with a specific musical style and replacing it with a need to accumulate that is very apt for a consumer society. In other times, a new release was awaited with anticipation, with speculation rife over song content, how an artist's sound might have changed, the message the music would transmit. Today, we can have the entire musical catalogue of any era at our disposal in a matter of minutes, gaining in access capacity to music but losing the social discourse that would help us to understand it.

As we mentioned before, music has always been mixed with social existence; it animates, accompanies and imitates the organic functioning of life. And this is precisely what it does in an age of digital ubiquity, it aligns with a way of life that is ephemeral, spurred on by the consumer rhythm that the market imposes, and which implies weak interpersonal links, a light ideological substratum and cultural parameters that are difficult to control. In this context, the music, digitally compressed, transcends time, an element that is consubstantial to it and which it inhabits in its very essence (Horta, 2008). This mercantilization of music cancels out self-expression and favours the repetition of predictable, standardised models. The crisis of the music industry sees it turn increasingly towards repetition, the latest star is boosted, as are all those who seem suspiciously like stars of the past, casting aside the new and original. In other times, it was the music that wore the identity codes of each style to adorn the musical discourse and to reach a chosen public. Today the industry reinvents those codes, manipulates them, cle-

ans them up so that they reach a greater number of individuals, thus creating a musical pastiche that aims to be identified by various groups of individuals but which, in the attempt, loses its communicative power and its capacity to become a cultural reference. Also, all this is causing the elimination of the public discourse in the media of those musicians who are starting out and who can contribute something new to the current saturated musical discourse. To combat this rejection of the unknown, new forms of putting music in contact with society are emerging via social networks like MySpace or YouTube, where the music industry loses influence over the medium when deciding what musical content is to be projected. Here public taste determines the success of a type of music. However, it must be remembered that social categories of taste and taste itself or aesthetic sensibility are socially determined. So the universes of individual preferences are organized homologically in terms of the structure of social space, and they reproduce their configuration. Thus, today's musical taste is conditioned by the sound saturation to which we are exposed, so nobody has the right to set the sound, it floats continuously in the air, appearing and disappearing without warning, and leaves traces in our sound memory that have little to do with the original listening experience. Clearly postmodern society gives more importance to the immediate availability of sound than to the act of recalling the cultural discourse of the music. Little by little music pulls back from those boundaries within which it was comprehensible and ceases to facilitate a perfectly defined cultural identity in favour of diverse mobile identity models.

5. Conclusions

The history of Western music of the last 50 years is marked by its integration into a society in which the predominant form of cultural dissemination has identified with the mass media and the new technologies. Gradually, music has been assimilating a wide range of changes and mutations from new languages, the alteration of habits of communication and listening, the consequent crisis of the traditional aesthetic canons to

the very notion of the work of art. We can add other changes of great sociological importance, like the disproportionate increase in musical consumption. Postmodern music is characterized by a pluralism of styles and languages that tend towards making its contents complex and relative. The current variability of tastes linked to a continuous transition of fashion provoked by social dynamism, and a growing democratization of culture imply a succession of brief musical aesthetics.

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unitary aesthetic conscience but a multiplicity (many styles, messages, etc) of fragmented aesthetic consciences. But we cannot forget that music is impregnated with a social spirit that determines it in the end, so the music of today, through its sounds, reflects the way of being that is appropriate to our society.

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