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## Background by Design: Listening in the Age of Streaming
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It was not easy being a music enthusiast in nineteenth-century Amsterdam. With no renowned composers of her own, the city was widely considered the unfortunate cousin of European music capitals Paris, London, Leipzig and Vienna. Much of the blame fell on Amsterdammers themselves, with critics as well as visiting musicians regularly blasting audiences for their seeming inability to take serious music seriously. A letter written by the German composer and conductor Carl Friedrich Zelter to his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1823 describes a concert he had attended in the Dutch capital: 'the men are smoking, the women are knitting […] one has a book and is reading, the ear itself shies off, reluctant to listen' (quoted in Metzelaar, 51).

In the second half of the century, members of Amsterdam's cultural elite set about changing mentalities and perceptions of their city. The solution, it seemed, was a purpose-built concert hall: the 'Concertgebouw', a building whose architecture would embody a new and different understanding of what music should mean and how it should be listened to. In his 2016 book *Building Musical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Amsterdam*, philosopher-historian Darryl Cressman tells the story of how this 'aspirational idea of a musical culture' provided the backdrop against which particular design questions were asked and answered: Would acoustics be important? What about sight-lines? Would the hall be shaped like a shoe-box or a horse-shoe? Would there be boxes for royal guests? Would the audience be seated or would people be encouraged to stand and move about? Would the stage even be big enough for an orchestra? Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, as Cressman argues, was 'culturally and materially biased towards attentive listening' (Cressman, 16). Sight was subordinated to sound and any potential distraction was identified and eliminated.
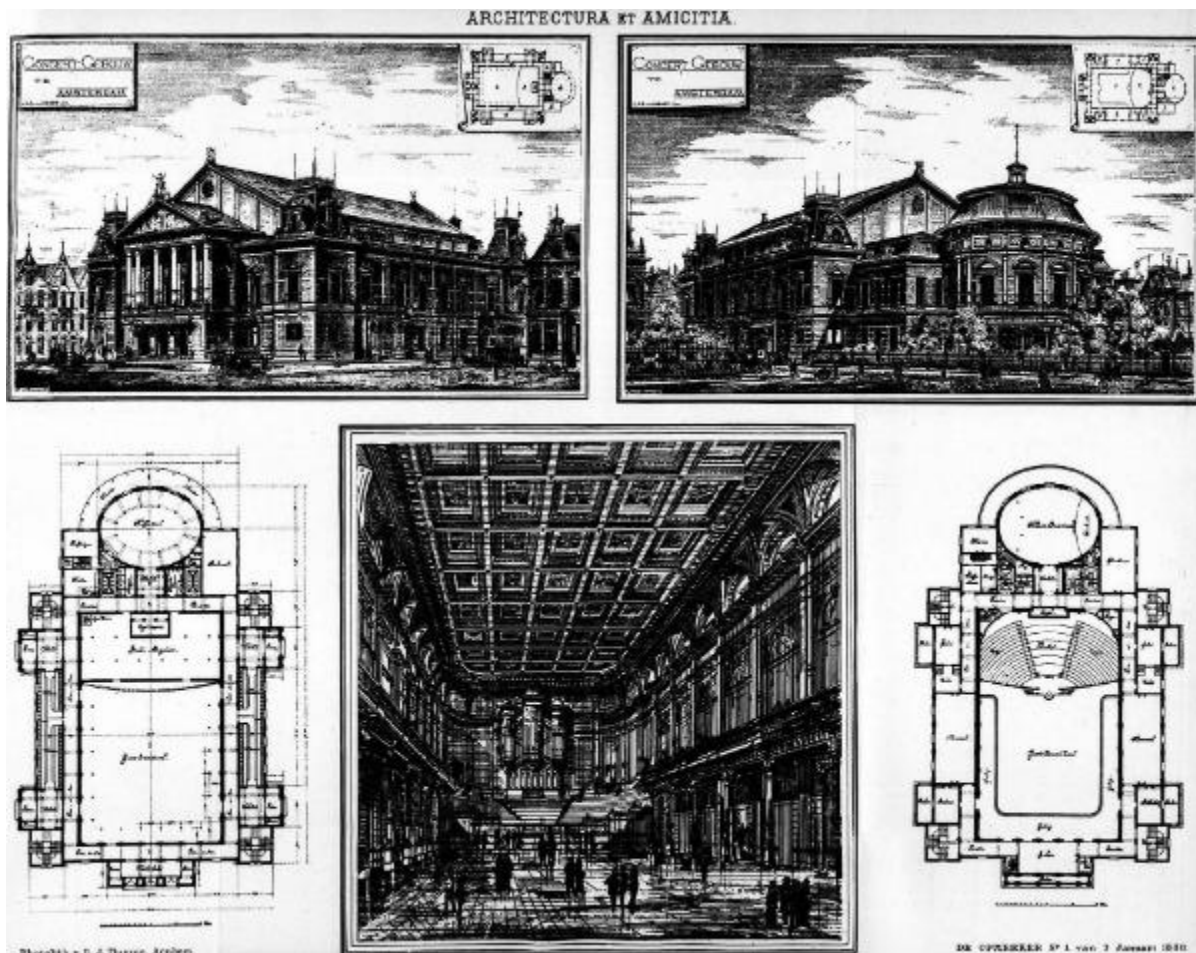
Architectural drawings of the Concertgebouw by Adolf Leonard van Gendt, c. 1888

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In contrast, it is easy being a music enthusiast in twenty-first-century Amsterdam. Today, the Concertgebouw is one of the most highly regarded and most visited concert halls in the world. To quote Dutch conductor Bernard Haitink, it is 'the best instrument of the orchestra that it houses' (see 'About the Building'). Of course, one need not visit the Concertgebouw - or any concert hall - to appreciate music today in Amsterdam, Anaheim, or in Ankara. The music we listen to is more often mediated through devices in our pockets, our homes and our cars, rather than by the walls of a purpose-built hall. For much of the world, the present and future of listening to recorded music appears to be dominated by streaming (IFPI, 2018). So if we can learn something of nineteenth-century ideals about musical culture by examining the design of the Concertgebouw, perhaps we can gain insight into what music means today by exploring the modes of listening baked into streaming platforms such as Spotify, QQ Music or Apple Music.

While the Concertgebouw may indeed promote attentive, focused or concentrated listening, what mode of listening do these streaming services promote?

The leading platforms boast music libraries with tens of millions of tracks. Roughly 40,000 new songs are added to Spotify's library every day (Ingham, 2019). This is more music than anyone could listen to in a lifetime. Some media scholars have used the analogy of a restaurant buffet to describe the way streaming platforms sell themselves to listeners. Pelle Snickars, for example, points out that streaming listeners can have a taste of everything, without needing to make much of a choice, or to think twice about what to listen to. Like side dishes at your local 'all-you-can-eat' diner, on streaming platforms 'more music is better music' (Snickars, 2016, 197).

While an emphasis on access and dissemination might describe the early days of music streaming, recent years have witnessed a focus on curation. Unable to build a competitive advantage through the sheer size of their catalogues, streaming platforms are each attempting to perfect the arts of personalization and prediction: giving listeners exactly what they want, and what they don't yet know they want. In Spotify's 2018 SEC filing, the company revealed that it programmed 31 percent of all listening on the service, compared to less than 20 percent two years earlier (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2018). This represents a basic shift in the pattern of consumption: from listeners identifying music, to music identifying listeners.

Consolidating a trend indicated by popular music scholar Rob Drew (2005), the playlist has become the central form of music curation on streaming platforms. Logging on to Spotify (the leading audio streaming platform in the Western world), you are immediately confronted with a wall of playlists, personalized by your listening history, the time of day and other specific cues. There are over three billion user-generated playlists on Spotify, though the listener would have to rummage around for these. Even a casual glance at Spotify's interface makes it clear that Spotify-curated playlists are heavily promoted over playlists compiled by users and other third parties. Spotify has created over 4,500 of its own playlists (Spotify for Artists, 2017). This includes personalized playlists such as 'Discover Weekly', 'Daily Mix', 'Release Radar' and 'Your Summer Rewind', which are algorithmically generated for individual users. It also includes playlists created by in-house Spotify editorial teams curated around specific genres, such as 'RapCaviar' and 'Jazz Classics'. However, as many commentators (Joven, 2018) have noted, the most prevalent trend is the rise of context-named playlists such as 'Summer BBQ', 'Songs to Sing in the Car', 'Party' and 'Workout'. Also prominent are playlists that reference particular moods and emotions, such as 'Life Sucks' or 'Happy Hits'.

The organization of music around listener-centered descriptors (context or moods) rather than musical styles or genres signals a functionalist perspective that regards music as both accompaniment and actant: that is, background to our everyday routines, amplifier for experiences and enabler of moods. As writer and Soul Theft drummer Antti Kailio puts it (2019, 24) puts it, this shift in how music is organized and categorized 'implies that there's a change in the way people approach music; instead of asking "What is this music like?" they might ask "What is this music suitable for?"'

The foregrounding of context- and mood-based playlists represents more than a banal or superficial design decision: the principle that underlies it can be traced all the way to the top brass in the industry. 'We're not in the music space', Spotify's CEO

Daniel Ek famously told *The New Yorker*, 'we're in the moment space' (quoted in Seabrook, 2014). Much more than simply a rhetorical flourish, to be about 'moments' is to be about serving – not the individual user – but the user's 'context state' (Pagano et al., 2016, 1). What this means in practice is that Spotify collects as much data as possible about users' whereabouts, activities, behaviours and psychological affinities in order to be better able to musically program the moments of their day.

While market research has always guided the production of music industry 'product' (Negus, 2013), streaming playlists can be made and remade infinitely. Datafied user feedback does not only extend the malleability and modularity of playlists; it also extends and amplifies the modular potential of individual tracks themselves, allowing songs to be rearranged, repackaged and reformatted to fit the perceived tastes of particular playlists and listener profiles. For example, experiments have been undertaken with increasing or decreasing a track's tempo to match the listener's walking or running pace. A London-based start-up called AI Music has made it their mission to 'shape change' music. As the company's CEO stated in an interview:

Maybe you listen to a song and in the morning it might be a little bit more of an acoustic version. Maybe that same song when you play it as you're about to go to the gym, it's a deep-house or drum'n'bass version. And in the evening it's a bit more jazzy. The song can actually shift itself. (Dredge, 2017)

For this transformation to occur, someone certainly needs to be 'listening' attentively, but this not necessarily the listener. To put it bluntly: the platform listens so that the listener doesn't have to.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

If a nineteenth-century concert hall can be understood as the materialization of ideals about attentive listening, then streaming platforms can be said to build 'inattentive listening' into their service. For many scholars, critics and lovers of music, this signals a worrisome trend. Playlists, Liz Pelly (2017) writes, 'have spawned a new type of music listener, one who thinks less about the artist or album they are seeking out, and instead connects with emotions, moods and activities'. After surveying the rapid and disruptive changes to how recorded music has been consumed over the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018, 1568) conclude:

> Many music fans report a sense of loss regarding music's power. Some would say this is merely nostalgia, but the ubiquity of music, its constant presence as background, heard in a rather distracted way, seems to be connected to a loss of its cultural and emotional force.

As honorable as it may appear, however, the elevation of attentive listening over inattentive or background listening is tightly bound to issues of class and gendered politics of taste. In the nineteenth century, attentive listening demonstrated 'an educated appreciation of music that distinguished the bourgeois from both the aristocracy and the lower classes, both of whom listened to music as if it were mere entertainment' (Cressman, 2016, 76). More recently, attentive listening has been criticized for its gendered assumptions (see Straw, 1997; Baade, 2018). Keir Keightley (1996) describes a satirical article that appeared in the magazine *High Fidelity* in 1954. Annoyed by the

distractions of family life, the audiophile author invents a sound-proof box he calls 'the Yogi Enclosure'. Positioned directly in front of the living room's stereo speaker, the box is just big enough for a man to sit in cross-legged. The article concludes by pointing out that 'the Yogi Enclosure' contains a slot [that] 'allows your wife to slip you a sandwich now and then' (ibid, 149).

Perhaps Yogi's wife might have enjoyed the Spotify playlist 'Songs to make sandwiches to'.

There's a serious point to be made here too. As Christina Baade reminds us, if we want to understand the appeal of streaming platforms and so-called 'lean-back' listening, then we need to contemplate 'the gendered inequalities that inform not only the different values ascribed to musical taste and listening practices but also who is responsible for domestic labour and care work' (Baade, 2018, 19). More generally, she argues, we should avoid judging ways of listening through class-, gender- or culturally-biased value systems.

We also need to remember that inattentive listening is not new. Pelly (2017) quotes a music-industry insider who explains that 'lean-back' listening is an 'ever more popular Spotify-induced phenomenon'. But this gives too much credit to one company. In her book *Ubiquitous Listening*, Annahid Kassabian (2013, 16) points out that 'stunning amounts of music are created and produced in any year, and the vast majority of it is not destined for attentive engagements'. Kassabian is not referring to the 40 million tracks on Spotify, but rather to 'film and television music, music in stores, music in video games, music for audio-books, music in parking garages, and so on'.

However, this does not mean that we need to uncritically accept the design of technologies for listening. We can circle around what Baade (2018, 16) calls "the problem of taste" by focusing on how the architecture of music streaming platforms positions listeners in relation to artists and their labour. If listening to music is about listening to the people who make music – musicians – then how do platforms assemble and bring together these two parties?

One answer might be that, by promoting platform-curated playlists, streaming services tend to obscure the curatorial labour of musicians. For example, a search on Spotify for the Dutch drum and bass trio Noisia returns the group's profile, immediately followed by the Spotify-curated playlists 'This is Noisia'. Then follows 'Noisia Radio' and several other Spotify-curated playlists featuring Noisia. Albums released by the group itself appear only after scrolling through a list of Noisia's most popular tracks and a list of artists with similar names.

This deliberate manipulation of search results is a design decision; one that permits the platform to assume control over curation. 'The curator becomes more significant than the creator', Keith Negus argues (2019, 371). As a result, musicians have less control over the presentation of their work than they did in the album era. Instead, platforms decide how artists are labelled and grouped together, and the genres, contexts, brands or themes around which music is organized. Rather than listening to the song 'Slow Burn' as the opening track of Kacey Musgraves' album

'Golden Hour', the playlist consumer hears this song somewhere deep within the six-hour long, 100-track playlist 'Lazy Sunday Music'.

Certainly, playlists have organized music on terrestrial radio for a long time. But rather than one or two singles being used to promote a retail album, on streaming platforms an entire album can be disassembled and reassembled alongside other tracks, from other artists, in other genres, and around unforeseen themes. The artist has no say in the matter. In contrast to radio, as Morris and Powers (2015, 108) put it, 'streaming collapses boundaries among distribution, exhibition and consumption'.

This has profound ramifications for music and for musicians. Like the creators of news, games and other content on Facebook, musicians become subordinate, mere content-developers for playlists: useful for attracting users but at the same time interchangeable and ultimately dispensable. In the summer of 2016, *Music Business Worldwide* reported that Spotify was paying producers from a Stockholm-based company a flat fee to create tracks under fake names such as 'Charles Bolt' and 'Karin Borg' in order to fill out Spotify-curated mood-themed playlists such as 'Peaceful Piano', 'Deep Focus' and 'Ambient Chill' (Ingham, 2016). These so-called 'fake artists' went on to generate billions of streams for which Spotify did not need to pay royalty rates to record labels. While this controversy pitted Spotify against the music industry, the real casualties are artists vying for these same playlist spots. As recently as August 2018, over 90 percent of the tracks on the Spotify playlist 'Ambient Chill' were under these made-up names (Ingham, 2018). In the near future however, the term 'fake artists' may take on a different meaning, thanks to Spotify's collaboration with François Pachet, one of the world's foremost experts in composing music via Artificial Intelligence. Soon there may no longer be a need for Swedish producers hiding behind pseudonyms: human agents may be entirely unnecessary. The question is: will listeners even notice?

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Just as nineteenth-century 'classical' music cannot be understood apart from the concert halls that mediated both music and ideas about attentive listening, contemporary music, the business of listening, and the meanings attributed to both will be intimately tied to platforms. As several scholars have pointed out, 'listeners' are nowadays being recast as 'users' of a service, customers who 'outsourc[e] the creation, maintenance, and storage of their music collections' to platforms (Morris, 2015, 168). In turn, the organization of music – and sometimes even individual tracks themselves – is modulated to fit particular user profiles and lifestyle 'moments'. Instead of listeners 'attending' to music, music (to borrow from the etymology of the Latin term *attendere*) is made 'to stretch toward' its users. Tellingly, AI Music's tagline is 'Music That Listens To You'.

Of course, design doesn't determine: I can still select an album and listen attentively on Spotify, just as you may spend a Concertgebouw performance staring at your phone. Different modes of listening have always existed in tandem and in tension with each other. Yet, like any technology, streaming has affordances that constrain certain behaviours while facilitating others. If we can see the concert hall as 'media of the classical music tradition' (Cressman, 2016, 16); if we can speak of 'the concert hall effect' as both 'a way of listening and a way of organizing what is to be listened to'

(Cressman, 2016, 18); then we might also think of a corresponding 'platform effect' for the contemporary listening moment (see Morris, forthcoming).

At the same time, technological objects and the practices associated with them acquire their particular meanings within a cultural and historical context. Ideas about how we should attend to music also shape how technologies for listening are designed. Listeners come to streaming platforms with certain expectations that are shaped by their previous encounters and experiences with music. Peer-to-peer file-sharing services such as Napster and its successors culturally primed listeners to value personalization, mobility and connectivity. As the Swedish-born Spotify expands and enters very different musical cultures around the world – such as India, where the consumption of music has long been intertwined with the Bollywood film industry – how might ideas about listening be reflected in platform design? As the children of millennials grow up on YouTube, TikTok and yet-to-be-released apps, how will listening practices change in accordance? Listening, as both a practice and a value, has its own historically and culturally-specific stories – many of which remain to be told.

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