

Music, Sound, and Multimedia, From the Live to the Virtual Edited by Jamie Sexton
Published by Edinburgh University Press, 224 pages, Hardback £55
ISBN:9780748625345

Review by Mik Parsons

It is inherent in the nature of an edited collection of academic discourses that, in the words of Abraham Lincoln (or was it Bob Dylan?), “You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all the people all of the time”. That is particularly the case here.

Jamie Sexton does an admirable editing job by artfully grouping ten expertly written papers (his own included) into a collection under a broad but appealing title. This, of course, is the art of the editor. However it is equally true to say that the reader may not find all of the material to their interest, since much will depend on their taste, interests (and ability to concentrate!).

The introduction, virtually a paper in itself, sets the scene very effectively. Sexton offers a brief historical survey followed by an attempt at defining multimedia - which reveals that most of our listening experiences are, in fact, multimedia experiences. A good example is the case of the classical guitarist who provides his audience with a multimedia experience not only in terms of the musical performance but also in his physical and facial expressions (not to mention the environment itself). Thus, the definition of multimedia becomes extremely broad: perhaps the nearest we can get to a “pure” listening experience is through headphones. However, even this notion is brought into debate in some of the papers in this collection.

Sexton introduces us to digital trends (again approached historically), and cites the proliferation of music through the internet, from webzines to digital mash-ups. He points out that our listening habits have changed from the familiarity of listening to a vinyl collection to the overload consumption brought about by online delivery methods and the ubiquitous mp3. Digital convergence also means that we are often

more likely to experience sound and music accompanied by some sort of visual material either through the television or the computer screen. There is an interesting historical connection here between the ‘drawing on film’ work of Oskar Fischinger² in the fifties and the hypnotic iTunes-visualizer which I still occasionally call up on my iMac screen.

The compendium is divided into four sections in order to group the papers into meaningful categories. The first of these sections is called Fandom and Music Videos.

Angelina Karpovich’s insightful paper sets up the contrast between the commercial MTV style music video which concentrates primarily on the performer, and the *fan-vid* which introduces new narratives through juxtaposition of other video material (she gives an example on Youtube, of a typical video comprising edited shots of two people, set against the music of a popular song in such a way to imply a romantic relationship between them). However, she notes that the fan-vid makers’ insistence that the two forms are different, is more of a defensive measure in their attempt to claim the fan-vid as a new form. The reality is, she says, that both are conceptually similar.

Both use “metaphor and association of ideas”³ and both use intertextuality to create new narratives and settings: elegantly demonstrated in Michel Jackson’s *Thriller* video and its direct connection to the horror genre.

The concept of the fan-vid is expressed differently by Dana Milstein in her paper on “Anime Music Videos”. She chronicles MTV’s history over two decades, from the Buggles’ “Video killed the Radio Star” (1981), to “Internet killed the Video Star” in 2000 by the fictional ‘Broad Band’. She uses this example as her introduction to the notion of the UMV (or the unofficial music video), described as “often subversive and deliberately ignoring copyright law” (p. 31)

The paper is well written and articulate although I found myself grappling with new terms UMVs, AMVs, and TMVs (Unofficial, Anime and Traditional Music Videos) and rather dense referencing to specific AMVs which really need to be seen in order to follow the paper’s arguments. Millstein compensates by describing scenes in some

detail but it still requires a good knowledge of Anime and its fan-base in order to get the most from this paper.

Much of the conclusion is actually a continuation of the paper into another topic and introduces another mnemonic, the MAD, which is the Japanese term for AMVs as Videos of Madness.

In “Section 2: Video Game Music”, Rod Munday begins his paper with a provocative opening statement “...there is no longer any such thing as video-game music” (p. 51). He chooses to concentrate on platform-based games because they offer CD quality sound; many might find this surprising since it immediately excludes the entire internet phenomenon and the high quality sound delivery possible though broadband. He later qualifies his opening statement by defining video-game music as:

“a discrete pattern of sounds and silences generated by the game software which, in combination of other visual, kinaesthetic and tactical sensory stimuli, contribute to creating the phenomenon of the game-world”. (p. 54)

A more appropriate model might simply distinguish between emotive sounds (feeling) and literal sounds (believing).¹

The central interest of this paper are the discussions on cognitive immersion, mythic immersion, and diegesis. Munday describes how music functions in three ways: environmentally (describing the game space), immersively (engaging the players’ emotions), and diegetically (contributing to the game narrative).

Munday’s discussion of immersion is however undermined by an allusion to a BBC survey suggesting game-players have other media on in the background (radio, TV, Hi-fi etc). This is qualified by the suggestion that such games could include solitaire (or chess, cards or any multitude of non computer games). This section is a distraction from the argument about immersion.

In the end this paper floats around interesting topics without really taking us anywhere. Munday's discussion of "mythic immersion" implies that the cinematic scoring approach (e.g. *Star Wars* 1977), has no place in video games - since such music primarily acts only as a quote from the film itself rather than having any function in the game-world. He concludes by asserting that many game designers are moving away from this approach and relying more on "realworld sound effects". This separation of sound and music however moves us away from the author's earlier attempt to combine music and sound into one definition, but also is not helpful in discovering how emotive scoring can be used in the game world.

I found myself more drawn in by the discussion centred on the quote by Mike Pummel that "the game doesn't know where the music is and the music doesn't know where the game is" (p. 62), which alludes to the verticality of the association between image and sound. Chronology and cause-and-effect cannot be defined by music, since it is the player who controls the narrative. Nevertheless, there is much of interest in this paper and in his defence the author does admit that his paper reveals contradictions and that "its reach has often been greater than its grasp".

Zach Whalen's paper "Film Music versus Video Game Music" also provides a valuable and relevant contribution to this section. He takes as a case-study *Silent Hill*, (1999) arguing that its positioning within the horror genre makes it perfect for analysis, since, the horror genre is well defined in musical terms. He points out that the arguments between the 'ludologists' and the 'narratologists' (i.e. gameplay versus story) have parallels with the debates in musicology. A linear narratological approach to music, he argues, is more suited to film but ultimately does not lend itself well to the game world where the narrative is not fixed. This neatly links back to the previous paper, and Mike Pummel's statement that "the game doesn't know where the music is and the music doesn't know where the game is" once again becomes resonant.

Whalen cites *Grand Theft Auto* (2004) as a good example of a game-space where the environment is completely open or has a "high degree of spatial granularity" (p. 73). The sound environment here is mostly generated by attaching sounds to objects such that the volume of the sound-objects increases as the player approaches. Since this object-oriented approach is used by programmers to construct the game in the first

place, Whalen argues, it makes sense to apply a similar approach to game-music analysis. This more ludological approach is to consider the music in what he theorizes as ‘unit analysis’, whereby the music world can be considered as a series of musical objects somewhat analogous to the individual performer in an orchestra. *Silent Hill* then becomes the perfect illustrative example through its elegant simplicity. Monsters lurk in the silence and their presence is signified by static noise emanating from the radio carried by the protagonist. Whalen uses this model to illustrate how the music output can range from silence to noise, through the layering of musical ‘units’.

Section Three, “Performance and Presentation”, takes us into a completely new area. There are three papers here and in the first one Jamie Sexton reflects on “Sound as Art”. He provides an overview of sonic art, defining it in relation to music and noise and a gives us historical review of its development.

A section on materiality and space illustrates how artists have experimented with the medium. Memorable examples include the amplifying of sounds from the Millenium Bridge and my favourite, the “Guitar Drag” - a video installation that featured an amplified Fender electric guitar tied to the back of a truck and dragged across various surfaces. (Here, the artist says he is addressing the mythology of the guitar by alluding to guitar songs about the road, guitar abuse by performers etc.)

Sexton’s overview also encompasses ideas of generative sound as exemplified by Steve Reich and Brian Eno who made use of a simple set of instructions and then relinquished control to chance. He goes on to describe how the internet now provides an interesting and rich environment for the sound artist and cites the Soundtoys website www.soundtoys.com as a resource of interesting ideas. He concludes by reminding us that this form of art is still relatively unexplored. We are reminded also that art galleries, historically, are visual spaces and it is only in more recent times that they have been used to accommodate the sound artist. Nowadays, however, the contemporary sound artist has the whole of digital cyberspace in which to experiment.

In the chapter, “Pop Music, Multimedia and Live Performance” (p. 105), Jem Kelly considers performance from a very different angle. Her historical review touches

upon early examples of multimedia performance such as Windsor McKay the American animator who performed his animations to a live audience and interacted with his cartoon character *Gertie the Dinosaur*. We are also transported back to the heady days in the Sixties of Velvet Underground and the delicious Nico as an example of multimedia pop performance achieved with the aid of slide projections and glitterballs. The discussion of more recent stadium-sized events such as Madonna's concerts provides a useful illustration of how a multimedia technological presence vies with the 'real' through amplification. There is also discussion of the interplay between the sonic (audible), the scopic (visual), and the somatic (physical). The author delights with such words and teases us with strange terms like "gallimaufry" and with pun phrases such as "hear and now" and "play and display". The band Gorillaz provides a final and more contemporary case study in which members are personified through animation and shadow forms within performance. Ultimately, having begun the essay with a quote about "reviving the corpse of the music" the author closes the paper with a real life (or death!) ironic example in which the band revived the corpse of a deceased performer (Ibrahim Ferrer) by projecting video of him playing as they continued to perform live. An entertaining and stimulating read.

In "Case Study: Film Sound, Acoustic Ecology and Performance in Electroacoustic Music", Randolph Jordan provides a contrast by considering the performance of 'acousmatic' sound. This is sound listened to in the absence of any visual stimulus. This paper was my personal favourite. It presents a difficult set of concepts in a well articulated and expressive style.

Jordan's introduction sets out the content of the paper in a clear and unambiguous way. An acousmatic performance would need to be done without visual focus on the performer; a particular example being the 'laptop' performance where 'a twitch of the wrist becomes a moment of highdrama' (Sherburne 2002:70). Fascinatingly Jordan draws upon Schaeffer's definitions and differentiates between acousmatic 'sound' where the visual presentation has simply been removed (a pop record for example), as opposed to the more specific acousmatic 'music' where we should also have no sense

of the source of the sound i.e. it exists as an object in itself and is detached from any real world object such as an instrument or loudspeaker.

He also leads us through the differentiation between the role of the 'diffuser' and our more traditional concept of the combination between performer onstage and the mixer in the audience. The diffuser has more control of spatial projection often through multi-speaker array and is thereby part of the performance itself.

I enjoyed too the contradictory definition of the audiophile as someone who seeks a 'transparent technology', i.e. the perfect recording of acoustic music performances which were never designed to be recorded in the first place! Jordan states his own view that sound reproduction equipment is as much an instrument as the 'real' instruments used in performance.

This is all well presented for the reader, who is then prepared for the more complex notion of 'acoustic ecology', a theory which demands a connection between sound and environment and discusses the replacement of one sound environment with another, a sort of acoustic schizophrenia.

Two theorists, Pierre Schaeffer and Murray Schafer, battle out the theoretical arguments between the pure acousmatic ideal and the more negative aspects of acoustic schizophrenia, although with such similar sounding surnames I couldn't remember who said what. Fortunately Hildegard Westerkamp⁴ is brought in to rescue us by suggesting the possibility that the opposing views could coexist.

The final Section is called "Production and Consumption" and I have to confess I found this the least interesting. The tantalisingly titled "Sound and Music in Website Design" by Lee Tsang turns out to be more about the measurement of irritation levels brought about by the presence of sound in websites. I was mildly interested to find that there is a difference between auditory icons (sound effects) and earcons (musical phrases), but the survey of responses to the MacDonalds "I'm Lovin' it" advertising campaign left me underwhelmed. I did go so far as to investigate a couple of web-links, but the Francois Ozon Swimming Pool reference was a dead end, and the

Braunart's 3D music site which I did eventually find, required me to install a bunch of Shockwave Player plug-ins which promptly crashed my computer.

Dan Laughey, in "Music Media in Young People's Everyday Lives", writes not only about where and how young people listen but also how they access information about music using different technologies. Placing this in a historical context it is amazing to consider how much our listening habits have changed since the humble gramophone, or in the case of my childhood, the Dansette record player, or even since the pre-Radio One days of the pirate radio station.

Laughey considers the notion of foreground and background listening and also distinguishes between private space and public space, the bedroom and the bus. Of course the boundary between public and private space overlap when considering more modern technologies such as the iPod where the headphone listening experience may be personal and private but the space, in the bus for example, may be public. His paper concludes with a useful diagram which tabulates the different characteristics of listening in terms of the media technology used, the context, involvement, and taste.

The book concludes with a chapter on the Development of the Apple iPod. As an Apple fan, I began reading with enthusiasm but was disappointed to find that this was set in the context of economics, a topic about which I know very little. One of the points the author makes is that whilst the iPod was marketed as being truly innovative and elegantly simple, its development was more driven by competition and the capitalist economic system and the complex symbiosis between rights owners and content delivery systems. Whilst interesting to the right audience, this wasn't for me I'm afraid.

This final chapter reinforces my earlier observation that whilst this book contains much of interest, some chapters will undoubtedly appeal more than others. Don't be misled by the book title into thinking that this is a guide to music, sound and multimedia, since it patently is not. Rather it is a series of highly focussed papers written by academics. Sexton has managed effectively to choose and organise the papers into a meaningful entity. However, the reader would be well advised to read his Introduction in order to appreciate how the subjects fit together.

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¹ Deutsch, Stephen, "Putting Music in it's place" in *The Soundtrack* Volume 1 Number 1 pp 3-13)

² <http://www.oskarfischinger.org/> (accessed on 25/02/2010)

³Bazin A.,(2004) *What is Cinema*. University of California Press

⁴ *The Soundtrack* Volume 2 Number 2