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## **Taking it in the ear: On musico-sexual synergies and the (queer) possibility that music is sex**

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### **Abstract**

Across ages and cultures, music's relationship to sexual allure and its adept capacity for invoking pleasure, eroticism and desire are well established. Music's ability to arouse and channel sexual urges and desires renders it both a dynamic mode of gender and sexual signification and a putative agent of moral corruption. Music can convey coded sexual innuendo, give shape to a person's erotic agency or constitute a significant part of their sexual identity. For some, listening to music may, in fact, be considered an erotically pleasurable or even a sexual act. Drawing selectively on music's erotic history, on queer erotic possibilities, as well as on contemporary accounts of musically mediated eroticism and identity situated across a broad range of popular genres, this paper will examine the way music can be used to catalyze and negotiate erotic pleasures. Specifically, it will examine this in terms of what the author names as 'musico-sexual synergies'. These include, music as a stylistic marker of sexual identity; music as a structuring device for sexual action; and the fetishisation of music and/or sound—that is, the sexual fetish known as 'auralism'.

### **Key words**

Music; erotics; identity; sexual action; auralism

### **Introduction**

Music, in the Western traditions at least, is a 'well-practiced device' in both the expression and 'production of desire' (Leppert 1993, 7). 'Music is ... very often concerned with the arousing and channelling of desire, with mapping patterns though the medium of sound that resemble those of sexuality' (McClary 1991, 8). Music's ubiquitous association with pleasure, eroticism, desire and unbridled—ergo 'primitive', oriental, feminine, queer—sexuality crosses centuries, cultures and multiple genres of expression. For example, the fourth century writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo suggest that he feared the delight of music on the flesh, and thus begged God to release him from the dangers that lay in the gratification of musical pleasure (Augustine 1961). Consider Strauss's opera *Salome* (1905) and the famously controversial "Dance of the Seven Veils". The erotic and hysteria educing dance employed dialogue, movement and the removal of costume in its effect, hinting at erotic deviations such as necrophilia, masturbation, homosexuality, fetishism and S/M<sup>i</sup> (Kostenbaum 2001). Moreover, suggests Scott, the eroticism is also 'encoded in the sensual richness (timbral and

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textual) of a huge orchestra, the quasi-Oriental embellishment of melody ... and the devices of *crescendo* and quickening pace (suggestive of growing excitement)' (2003, 29). Jazz too is well known for inducing moral panic due to its supposed 'primitive' sexuality and 'jungle' passion (O'Meally 1998). We might then consider rock critic Lester Bangs' description of The Troggs' 1961 hit, "Wild Thing" as 'the supreme manifestation of Rock and Roll as Global Worldmind Orgasm' (1988[1971], 67).

Eroticism may be encoded and decoded in music at multiple levels (Scott 2003; Peraino 2006). A composer may encode erotic desires in the way s/he structures musical sound; a lyricist may implicitly or explicitly employ erotic prose; a performer may imbue a performance with erotic qualities through gesture, costume or through a particular regulation of the voice, fingers, breath and body; or a listener may interpret certain music as erotic, embedding meaning—whether it was decidedly put there by a composer/lyricist/performer or not—into the music that can be called up at their discretion, arousing erotic fantasy or action. While making and performing music also deserves due attention within the schema of music and eroticism, what is of central concern herein are matters of everyday reception and use. Specifically, how erotic agency may be mobilised through the medium of music and how music is used to organise and give structure to one's sexuality.

Drawing on musicological and sociological literatures, online accounts of musically mediated eroticism situated across a broad range of popular genres, as well as on empirical case studies, this paper initiates an introductory examination of what I have named 'musico-sexual synergies'.<sup>ii</sup> For the purpose of this article, I have broken these down into three typologies: musico-sexual identity, musico-sexual narratives and musico-sexual fetishism. Herein, musico-sexual identity refers to music as a cultural resource in the signification of sexual identity via corresponding (sub)cultural<sup>iii</sup> style; musico-sexual narratives refers to music as a device used in sexual seduction and action that provides narrative structure for erotic encounters; and musico-sexual fetishism refers to the sexual fetishisation of music and/or sound, namely, the sexual fetish known as 'auralism'.<sup>iv</sup>

These three musico-sexual synergies will be examined in the order given above and matters of methodology will be addressed in each section. While the social and cultural organisations of gender and sexual identity have been well attended to in feminist and queer music criticism and interpretation (Brett, Wood and Thomas 1994; Cusick 1999; McClary 1991; Peraino 2006; Whiteley and Rycenga 2006), matters to be discussed here regarding erotic *uses of* music and agencies that are *provided by* music are less common. This is especially the case with regards to what I have termed musico-sexual narrative and musico-sexual fetishism: 'auralism' being a new vernacular term that I believe has, until now, been absent from academic discussion. Given this, it is narrative and fetish that will receive the most attention. The primary goal of this paper is, then, to augment our thinking around music reception, the erotic and sexuality—to (re)confirm music's place within the nexus of erotic activity and sexual pleasure.

### **An explanatory note on the (queer) possibility that music is sex**

Positing the notion that music is sex, as I did rather evocatively in my title, puts me on tenuous ground, and before I begin to unpack my three typologies, it is necessary to identify the origins of this idea and how it informs my proceeding examination. In her essay entitled "On a lesbian relationship with music: a serious effort not to think straight", Cusick, bravely confronted musicology with the question: 'what if music IS sex?' (1994, 78, emphasis in original). Shifting sexuality out of a reproductive sphere and aligning it with purely pleasurable intimacies, Cusick hypothesises that:

For some of us, it might be that the most intense and important way we express or enact identity through the circulation of physical pleasure is in musical activity, and that our 'sexual identity' might be 'musician' [and to this one could add music lover or performer] more than it is 'lesbian,' 'gay,' or 'straight.' (1994, 70)

[M]usic (like sex, which it might *be*) is first of all, something *we do*, we human beings, as a way of explaining, replicating, and reinforcing our relationship to the world, or our imagined notions of what possible relationships might exist. I suspect for all of us the originating joy of it comes from assuming more varied positions than we think we're allowed in regular life, positions that enable us to say yes or no, to immerse, to initiate, to have simultaneous but independent climaxes, to escape a system ... of bewildering fixed categories, to wallow in the circulation of pleasures that are beyond danger and culturally defined desires. (1994, 80, emphases in original)

Here, through her association of music with sexual pleasure and her positioning of music as a sexually gratifying activity, Cusick denaturalises or 'queers' sexual arousal and action. Queer as a verb—to queer something—is to unsettle that which is normalised. Particularly, but by no means exclusively, sex, gender and sexual norms and the manner in which they relate to one another. Cusick's thesis vigorously highlights the intense 'love' that many people harbour for music, our obsessive approach to it and offers an intriguing and subversive way of theorising the interconnectivity of music and sexual identity beyond genital-associated sexual pleasures, in part, fetishising music—an idea to which I will later return. Whether or not you choose to buy into the idea that music is, or at least could be, sex, the value and resonance of her autoethnographic ponderings are twofold. First, the provocation to 'not think straight': to think beyond reproductive logics, normativities of gender, sexuality and erotic pleasure, and the phallic economy. Second, to think of sex in musical terms: to think beyond naturalising and oppressive scientific discourse and experience our bodies, desires and sexualities in terms provided by culture, by music. Thus, Cusick sets up a referential framework for thinking about music as a structuring device for sexuality and erotic desire that I employ here and will return to at the end of each section.

### **Musico-sexual identities**

Sex, gender, sexuality and desire are discursively produced in and through cultural texts which are available to almost endless (re)interpretation. Music can be symbolic of the non-musical, it can be harnessed in the construction of erotic identities. There is no single musical style, genre, form, motive or cadence that exclusively pertains to one particular sexuality or form of eroticism. There is also no single musical style, genre, form, motive or cadence that is absolute, thus, outside a signifying system capable of generating sexual or erotic meaning. Music is a well-established tactical device in the production, transmission and maintenance of self-narratives, genders, sexualities and other forms of identification such as race, ethnicity, class, age and locality (DeNora 2000). Music's significant, albeit at times ambiguous and always contestable, role in the construction and articulation of sexual identities has been frequently written about. Given the extensive body of work that addresses music and sexual identity, in this section I merely seek to clarify the notion of musico-sexual identity based on existing literatures rather than unpacking specific empirical examples.

Frith and McRobbie have argued that the instrumentation, rhythmic intensity, climactic techniques, crude lyrics and loudness of cock rock, offers—at the expense of female sexuality—'a framework within which [white] male sexuality can find a range of acceptable, heterosexual expressions' (1990[1978], 375). Similarly, gangsta rap is a form of hip hop that

champions black male hyper-heterosexuality imbued with themes of violence, sexism and depictions, through lyrics and music video, of sexually objectified, gesticulating female bodies (Weekes 2004). For pre-teen and teenage girls, pop music and accompanied activities such as dancing, has provided a space for performances of heterosexuality and romantic fantasy (Frith and McRobbie 1990[1978]). In the context of queer and feminist musical epistemologies, folk music has been a vehicle for lesbian feminist articulations due to what the womyn's movement perceived as a 'softer', less aggressive and less 'masculine' sound (Bayton 1993). Disco and house music has provided a framework for the expression of both black and white queer sexualities: the disco anthem, suggests Currid, has served 'as a tool to channel disembodied diva-inty and fierceness through the embodied, eroticised practices of dance and lip-synching' (1995, 166). Likewise, erotic associations are evident in Dyer's (1995[1990]) defense of disco music in which he establishes disco's association with gay male sexual identity and recalls disco as a form of "'whole body" eroticism' (410), in contrast to what he argues is the 'disembodied' eroticism of popular song form and the 'thrusting, grinding ... not whole body but phallic' (411) eroticism of rock. The alternative music communities of riot grrrl created a musical space for the circulation of fierce feminine pleasures and provocative discussions of female genders and sexualities (Leonard 1997). And, in the decidedly queer punk style of, 'queercore',<sup>v</sup> we see that even in its name, a musico-sexual coalition is directly signaled: the prefix 'queer' meaning 'not straight' and the suffix core, indicative of the genre's punk rock extraction.

As the above examples illustrate, music can be associated with certain expressions of sexuality. This may occur at the level of the music itself such as timbral qualities, structure or rhythmic drive and/or via para-musical elements such as lyrics and performative gesture and extra-music elements such as visual style. Thus, both the textual and contextual factors must be considered. Moreover, this availability of music is never fixed or coherent. Just as certain music may become an individual or collective modality of sexual identity performance bound to a certain (sub)cultural grouping, it can always be appropriated and adapted to produce alternative cultural artefacts representative of, and meaningful to, an erotic other. In certain contexts, and dependant upon varying (sub)cultural literacies, musical identification allows one to be read as, and to perform, a particular sexual identity. The beauty of music is the multiplicity of this capacity. Returning to Cusick's (1994) earlier provocations, for her, sexual identity was framed *as* musical. Music did not merely signify her sexual identification as lesbian, but she playfully pushed beyond this, speaking of music in terms that potentially supersede the 'bewildering fixed category' of lesbian. The usefulness of thinking about music's flexible capacity to enable sexual identity work, as discussed above, renders Cusick's queer terms highly visible: queer in the sense that it allows for a way of signalling and 'doing' one's sexuality beyond the sexual act. The potential, then, of musico-sexual identification lies in acknowledging the musical's affect on the sexual: music's capacity to not only signal but also engender variations of erotic identities from within, and perhaps beyond discrete identity categories. It is this identificatory function of music that helps people make sense of who they are in the world, how they desire and, as I shall discuss now, how they enact desire.

### **Musico-sexual narratives**

Imagine, if you will, a dance floor: you are on one side and a body that you lust for (whether real or imagined) is on the other. A song begins to play: perhaps it's James Brown's "Sex Machine", Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" or the seductive 2/4 measure of a tango rhythm. Depending on taste, the right music can sonorically punctuate your veiled erotic desires, drawing you closer to your erotic objective and rationalising otherwise irrational bodily manoeuvres. With or without lyrics, the discursiveness of the nonverbal—rhythm, melody,

harmony and timbre—allow us to encode and decode eroticism in and through our bodies. We make, receive and perceive music with our bodies; we feel music in our bodies; the body both hears and sounds. We encode rhythmic, harmonic and melodic trajectories as tension and release within our muscles. Music often compels us to move, shaping bodily conduct, directing bodily motion and channelling erotic energies. It does so with dance (Buckland 2002), and it can similarly do so with sex. Consider the following description of ‘good’ music by author and composer Robert Jourdain:

Well written music takes its good time satisfying anticipations. It teases, repeatedly instigating an anticipation and hinting at its satisfaction, sometimes swooping towards resolution only to hold back with a false cadence. When it finally delivers, all resources of harmony and rhythm, timbre and dynamics, are brought to bear at once ... If this sounds as much like the recipe for good love-making as for good music-making it’s because the nervous system functions the same way in all its reaches. (1997, 319)

Here, Jourdain alludes to one of the reasons music is such a useful mapping device for erotic activity. That is, the narrative structure of certain musics can be read as a metaphor or simulation of desirable sex. Moreover, Jourdain proposed that this is not only in an abstract sense, but also in the ‘real’ physical sense that music affects the nervous system.<sup>vi</sup> In this section I will consider how and why music may be used as a device in sexual seduction and action, providing a narrative structure for erotic encounters.

Cinematic sex often provides vivid illustrations of musico-sexual narratives, albeit in much more spectacular ways than I am directly concerned with here. One example that comes to mind is the famous sex scene between lead characters Sam and Molly in the film *Ghost* (1990). To the tempo and dynamic contours of “Unchained Melody” performed by the Righteous Brothers, this scene depicts two making pottery, slow-dancing, caressing each other and eventually engaging in penetrative sex at a the most melodically intense moment in the song. Another, quite different example can be seen in John Cameron Mitchell’s sexually adventurous film, *Shortbus* (2006). The film triumphantly ends with singer and queer performance artist Justin Bond singing “In the End”. To a gentle soundtrack of vocals and chamber strings the characters, who have been battling their various emotional and sexual repressions thought out the film, all come together in one room—an artistic/sexual/queer salon—and begin ‘soft’ and slightly anxious erotic exchanges. Two-thirds of the way through the song, The Hungry Marching Band enters, shifting the musical dynamic—from soft strings to bold oompah brass—and with it rousing elation and erotic climax that sees the salon attendees break out into a sexually dynamic, musically embellished orgy.

In the context of the everyday, there has been little discussion of music’s ability to evoke and choreograph erotic action. Given that there are hundreds of websites that claim to rank ‘the best music to have sex to’ and thousands of online forum discussions concerning what music works best in sexual situations, I find this surprising.<sup>vii</sup> DeNora’s (1997) paper on “Music and erotic agency: Sonic resources and socio-sexual action” is one of the few examples that has given similar consideration to music. Drawing on what she calls the ‘musical-erotic experiences’ of four heterosexual subjects, DeNora argues that music can ‘be employed in ways that enable/constrain (and establish claims about) the shape and duration of sexual activity’ (1997, 61). In order to test and explore DeNora’s claims further, using a convenience sample, I conducted an email survey asking respondents to answer a series of open-ended questions relating to their uses, preferences, experiences and memories of music during erotic encounters. 12 people (seven male-identified, five female-identified, ranging in ages from early 20s to late 40s) completed this survey, and all 12 respondents acknowledged that music has at times been a useful device in structuring sexual activity, and on occasions

played a constitutive role. The types of sexual activities cited were varied: these included masturbation; male/female sex; female/female sex; male/male sex; group sex; sex work; casual sex; and sex in the context of a committed relationship. The information included here is part of a larger ongoing empirical investigation. For the purposes of illustrating the notion of musico-sexual narrative, here, I offer selected examples of the three most commonly cited uses of music during sexual activity that arose from this preliminary data-gathering exercise: mood-setting; dynamic contouring; and tempo regulation.<sup>viii</sup>

‘Setting the mood’ was an oft-cited phrase employed specifically by 11 of my respondents. However, when discussing music’s ability to establish scenic specificity, respondents commonly inferred beyond simple notions of mood or atmosphere and spoke more directly of music’s ability to cue the emotional intensity of an erotic encounter, giving shape to both the intra- and interpersonal dynamics of an erotic occasion. Always relative to personal logics of taste, interpretation and sensibilities, respondents gave numerous examples of how certain kinds of music could be played to signify to a partner that not only sex, but also what kind of sex was desired and what shape it would take. ‘Yes, it sets the mood...[but] the music itself often alters the sexual experience itself’ said one respondent. Going on he said, Nine Inch Nails inspires ‘raw and frantic sex’, Massive Attack prompts a ‘more sensual and tactile’ encounter, while Barry White ‘gets it all loving’. Another respondent recollected in pleasurable terms, an album by the house music producer Mylo and how she and a client used it to ‘push us further and faster into the act. He called the music ‘a modern day porn soundtrack’, she said, ‘and so we had sex as if we were on camera. It was heaps of fun’. Yet another respondent told me how she uses music to indicate to a lover ‘where I am at’:

Portishead means take care to touch one another with kind regard, but don't be too timid, it will be on. Nick Cave or Pattie Smith means, fuck this its on, who thinks they're the boss first? *Astral Weeks* means I warn you I am emotional and this encounter comes with heart-strings.

Respondents also highly valued temporal symmetry between music and sexual acts both in terms of speed and rhythm. Selecting the right music was about the music’s temporal fit with the kind of sex that they hoped to achieve. Undesirable rhythms were said to be ‘distracting’, a ‘massive deterrent’ and the making of ‘bad sex’. For example, three respondents said they would not choose to play metal during sex, not only because it can be ‘too angry’ but also because it’s ‘hard to find a good rhythm’. Another recalls an instance where, for him, ‘rhythm provided an oppressive gauge...[as a partner] with a very large dick...insisted on ramming it down my throat in time with the fat bass line’ of a song he had chosen. Vis-à-vis, desirable rhythms were said to enhance ‘the longevity of sex’; ‘help me pace myself’; ‘stop me ejaculating too early’. ‘Certain timings and rhythms suggest movement’ said one respondent, ‘and a person who grooves on that will be motivated to move accordingly’. Recalling a fondness for Massive Attack’s album *Blue Lines*, another respondent told me that he would often use it to time a sexual encounter, mapping the act from foreplay to penetration. He said, sex would often ‘start as a massage, progressing to rubbing of oily bodies together and culminating in penetration from behind with languid thrusts in time to the music’.

Here we see that music can act as a powerful structuring device for erotic action, not only accompanying sexual activity (as merely background), but narrativising erotic encounters: setting up scenes, dictating intensity, structuring pace, duration, climax and resolution; and forming bonds between sexual actors. In this preliminary discussion, I have used the term ‘musico-sexual narrative’ to suggest that music offers a structure or form which sex can be consciously mapped onto. As Cusick proposed, music is, after all something that reinforces our relationship to the world and to each other, helping us to initiate, immerse

ourselves in, and circulate erotic pleasures. If music isn't sex, then, for some of us it is "physically right next-door" (1994, 71)—the inherent libidinous pleasure of it, or at least music's discursively produced and subjectively interpreted libidinous pleasures, makes it an impressive cultural vehicle for channelling and narrating a variety of erotic actions.

Further research into music and sexual activity would benefit from considering less structured uses of and responses to music. For example, how does music affect people in a sex club or at a dance party where those engaging in sex have little or no choice over the music that is being played? While music may still contribute to mood-setting the body's response to music in such situations is likely to call for a different explanation of musico-sexual synergism beyond what, in this section, I have referred to as narrative.

### **Musico-sexual fetishism**

In this final section, I now turn to what some might consider the most 'perverse' or 'queer' of these actions. The ear can be an erogenous zone. Earlobes licked or bitten are known to sexually arouse some people, while whispering or breathing into the ear may similarly arouse others. The ear has even been constructed as a pseudo-sexual receptacle able to be penetrated with sound, music and sensation. As psychoanalyst Ernest Jones pointed out in his provocative writings on Catholic mythology entitled, "The Madonna's Conception through the Ear" (1951[1914]), the virgin mother of Christ was once believed to have, quite literally, 'taken *it* in the ear', crudely speaking. In other words, she was believed to have been impregnated by the breath of the Holy Ghost which entered her through her ear. While this idea may seem somewhat farfetched, I use it here to playfully and historically illustrate the erotic potential of the ear, sound and music, and to tangentially draw attention to the notion that sound and music is not only a structuring device for sexual identification and action as I discussed previously, but that for some people, it may also be a powerful sexual stimulant that brings them to a point of sexual gratification. While Cusick (1994) may not have had this in mind, it does poignantly echo her supposition that music may *be* sex. In this final section then, I will consider this in terms of music fetish and the sexual practice of auralism.

Put simply, the Merriam-Webster dictionary says a fetish is 'an object of irrational reverence or obsessive devotion'. Fetishism is considered 'unnatural' and thus a perversity, because the self-fulfilment that the fetishist gains through 'obsessive' investment in an object—the fetish—deviates from established cultural norms. According to European colonialist interpretations, the worshiping of totems in non-European rituals was a fetishisation of an object, as the object was believed to have primitive religious value or inherent power beyond what was considered normal, and it was from such colonial discourses that the term *fetishisme* originally emerged in 1760 (McClintock 1993). A century later, in his critique of the political economy of modern industrial society, Karl Marx employed the term 'commodity fetishism' to describe human relations as they are transformed by the products of labour where labourers become 'alienated' from their products, consumer objects gain unnatural power, and social relationships become inauthentically mediated through commodity production and exchange (Marx 1977[1867]).<sup>ix</sup> The notion of 'sexual fetishism' however, emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century most famously and influentially, although not originally,<sup>x</sup> in the work of psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1977a[1905]).

With its basis in Oedipal logic, Freud's highly contentious and masculinist thesis argued that a sexual fetish is the result of castration disavowal, where a surrogate penis is created in the mind of a male child exclusively, at the point in which he comes to discover his mother's 'castration', as Freud has so objectionably named it. Unlike the boy, the mother does not have a penis and realising this induces trauma in the boy who fears the possibility of his own

castration—a fear reinforced through paternal discipline. In the boy’s original moment of horror and disbelief, he displaces his attachment to the maternal phallus onto an object that was present when he first saw his mother’s ‘mutilated’ genitals—a shoe, breast, a hand, pubic hair, garments or lace perhaps—that is, the object that the boy’s eyes haphazardly focused upon in his recoiling horror. The fetish becomes ‘a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects’, Freud says (1977b[1927], 353-354). The real or fantasised presence of the fetish then becomes psychologically necessary for the male to achieve sexual gratification. Following Freud, Jacques Lacan similarly advocated that fetishism must be the exclusive domain of the male: given that “the imaginary motive for most male perversions is the desire to preserve the phallus which involved the subject in the mother”, and since fetishism is the “virtually manifest case of this desire”, fetishism *must* be absent in women’ (Lacan cited in McClintock 1993, 194, emphasis in original). But of course today we know—from the internet, women’s participation in fetish clubs, the array of fetish products marketed to women—that this is untrue. Moreover, as scholars such as McClintock (1993), Gamman and Makinen (1994) among others, have demonstrated, women too can be active practitioners of sexual fetishism. And while it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in any extensive theoretical critique of fetishism itself, it is the intention here to include women in my thinking, conceptualise desire as active and to depart from the pathologisation of individuals as perverts, thus, a different model of fetishism is necessary.

In order to take up my discussion of music fetish and auralism, I employ an understanding of a sexual fetish identified in a paper published by Paul Gebhard in 1969 and more recently cited for its usefulness in thinking about different intensities of fetishism by Gamman and Makinen (1994) and Sullivan (2003). Gebhard conceptualised Freud’s sexual fetishism along a continuum of behaviours and intensities that he categorised in four levels. The first and lowest level was when ‘a slight preference exists for certain kind of sex partners, sexual stimuli or sexual activity’. The second suggests a ‘strong preference exists for certain kind of sex partners, sexual stimuli or sexual activity’. The third is where ‘specific stimuli are necessary for sexual arousal and sexual performance’. And the fourth and most intense levels is when ‘specific stimuli takes the place of a sexual partner’ (cited in Gamman and Makinen 1994, 38). As Sullivan has suggested, this model ‘allows us to consider fetishism as a diverse range of practices and intensities and to move away from the universalising and essentialising notion of fetishism as a singular pathology’ (2003, 172).

While a fetish for high-heel shoes, corsets, rubber, leather or lingerie for example are well documented, a fetish for music is far less so, however there is evidence to suggest that it does exist. Where the voyeur gains sexual pleasure from watching, the aural and music fetishist gains pleasure in hearing. Definitions and discussion of what is becoming known as ‘auralism’ can be found on a number of BDSM, kink, and fetish websites.<sup>xi</sup> A useful definition which similarly identifies varying intensities of fetishism that I noted above, was entered in 2008 on the increasingly popular online Urban Dictionary site that specialises in web-based archiving of new lexicons:

Auralism is a sexual fetish defined as sexual arousal or excitement caused by sound, to be compared with voyeurism. This sound might be music, a voice, the actual sounds of sex itself, or other sounds, and may include enjoyment from listening to others having sex. As with most fetishes, in some cases it is simply a small additional turn-on, and in others it is a requirement to sexual gratification. (Heathen, 2008)



In order to explore this further, I began to regularly read online discussions with members of a music fetish, aural fetish and auralism forums through a number of adult websites. It was through personal membership to such sites that I first became aware of these fetishes, therefore, this exploration is loosely participant observatory. From the limited descriptive information that people post about themselves to such sites, there appears to be an even distribution of male-identified and female-identified music/aural fetishists, reconfirming that fetishism is not absent in women. The majority of these sites are password-protected, restricting membership to people 18 years or older and members are identified by a nickname rather than their real name suggesting that members expect a certain level of privacy and anonymity. Moreover, many of these sites have strict terms of use prohibiting naming the sites in a research context without the express written permission of the owners (which I have thus far been unable to obtain).<sup>xii</sup> Therefore, in the interest of ethical Internet research about which there are many contentious debates (see for example Ashford 2009; McKee and Porter 2009), I take the stance that site-specific text and forum members' posts should not be quoted verbatim without informed consent, as such the forum discussions which I have observed are referred to in general terms only. When engaging in any private online discussions via these sites I explicitly made the other person aware of my position as a researcher. Specific discussion topics are paraphrased and experiences discussed are decontextualised, making it impossible to trace and attribute them to a specific site, site user or online forum. In other words, this should not be considered an ethnographic study of online auralism and music fetish communities (although this would be a useful future study which I intend to take up) but rather, this is a textual examination only for heuristic purposes of understanding the possibility of musico-sexual fetishism.

These online forums operated like most others where site members can join a forum, begin a discussion topic to which other members can respond, initiating multiple conversations and 'threads'. Auralism, aural fetish and music fetish forum discussions were quite varied, ranging from members trading links and play lists of songs they merely like and songs they enjoy having sex to, to discussions of the role that music plays in designated fetish clubs, to specific discussions of music and sounds that sexually arouse an individual and in some cases, bring them to sexual climax. Common citations of sexual preference, arousal and climax included the voice and specific tonal qualities (e.g. a deep male voice), the vocalisations of other people engaging in sex, the sounds of a body-part in sexual encounters, specific instrumental sonorities (e.g. the timbre of a cello), music that conforms to a specific style (e.g. industrial music at 118 beats per minute), or a specific piece of music sometimes described in terms that memorialised past sexual encounters causing significant arousal when heard again.

Returning to Gebhard's four level continuum of fetishistic behaviours and intensities, from my observations and private online discussions, I did not come across any accounts where music or aural stimuli exclusively took the place of a sexual partner. With the exception of one forum post that discussed one person's ability to orgasm while listening to desired music and vocal annunciations and without genital contact, all forum posts that I followed talked of music and sound in terms that appeared complementary to physical contact. This suggests that aural and music fetishes mostly accompany other stimuli in sexual arousal. However, this does not diminish the value of exploring the possibility of musico-sexual fetishism. Thinking of music and the aural as a fetish object takes us further away from the Freudian notion of castration disavowal. Where Freud placed an emphasis on 'seeing', opening up discussion of musico-sexual fetishism potentially shifts this sensory preference to allow us to think about the erotic potential of sound and music in new, and perhaps queer ways—that is, embracing Cusick's propensity to not think straight. As Sullivan points out, 'fetishism, insofar as it is—or has been constructed as—perverse, has the capacity to challenge or to queer sexual and social norms' (2003, 168). Aural and music fetishes then, are

potentially queer moments of desire. Music may constitute a queer erotic reality beyond the boundaries of gender, sexed bodies and specific bodily orientations. This, I argue, is a significant area of further investigation that I am currently undertaking.

## Conclusion

This article has reviewed and expanded upon some of the ways music can be used to inform and give agency to erotic identities, desires, arousals, pleasures and gratifications through a prefatory examination of what I termed ‘musico-sexual synergies’. To think queerly, as this article has attempted to do, is to acknowledge that sexual identification, action and desire are phenomenologically volatile and cannot be given stability or uniformity within naturalising scientific discourses. I suggest that by acknowledging the circulation of intimate erotic pleasures in and through music—using music to engender, experience and intensify the erotic—we edge further away from what Foucault (2008[1976]) named the *scientia sexualis* of Western civilisation and the ‘uniform truths’ of sex that it permits, conceals and forbids. To do so is to not fear the erotic delight of music, but to embrace it and celebrate it—to acknowledge music’s constitutive role in shaping erotic human relations. As McClary has put it, ‘the power of music—both for dominant cultures and for those who would promote alternatives—resides in its ability to shape the ways we experience our bodies, emotions, subjectivities, desires, and social relations’ (2000, 6–7). But, as DeNora (1997) has noted, what it means to speak of this ‘power’ is significantly under-explored. In short, this article has attempted to speak, albeit partially, of music’s erotic power, to insight further exploration into it, and when doing so, to promote the value of ‘not thinking straight’.

## Notes on contributor

Jodie Taylor is a research fellow at Griffith University. She is the author of *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-making* (Peter Lang, 2012) and co-editor of two forthcoming collections: *The Festivalisation of Culture: Place, Identity and Politics* (Ashgate 2012) and *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music* (Routledge 2012). Additionally, Jodie has authored numerous journal articles and book chapters on queer scenes, popular music and identity and ethnographic methods.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> S/M is an abbreviation for sadomasochism. Sadism and masochism are often considered related practices hence the conflation of the term. See Sullivan (2003) for further explanation.

<sup>ii</sup> The first time I employed the idea of musico-sexual synergies in relation to identity (see Taylor, 2008). This article marks a further development in these terms.

<sup>iii</sup> Herein, any reference to the term ‘(sub)culture’ is in the vernacular sense. Thus, it should not be interpreted as an unqualified use of the term as it pertains to subcultural theory.

<sup>iv</sup> This article serves as a broad introduction to these ideas and should not be considered exclusionary of other musico-sexual typologies worthy of consideration.

<sup>v</sup> Originally named homocore, but the prefix homo was later changed to queer. However, homocore, queercore and dykecore are terms often used interchangeably.

<sup>vi</sup> A physiological/scientific rational is beyond the scope of the paper. However, the physical impact of music on the body cannot be completely discounted.

<sup>vii</sup> Such sites and forums are in abundance. A simple Google search for the complete phrase ‘best songs to have sex to’ returned over 4000 results.

<sup>viii</sup> A number of other common uses also emerged including music as a masking device for baffling sound; a way to memorialise a sexual encounter; a signifier of sexual availability; a mechanism for self-empowerment, getting into character and performing a different version of self; and a direct sexual stimulant for assisting climax. The discussion presented here will be elaborated on in future research that focuses in more detail on music and sexual action.

<sup>ix</sup> 'Commodity' is the rubric within which fetish-related discussions of music are most commonly located. Adorno employs Marxist thinking in his writing on popular music, fetishism and the commodification of artistic expression (see for instance Adorno 2001[1938]). Another more recent example is the extreme investments of time and money that some people put into the acquisition of high-fidelity listening devices which is commonly referred to as audiophilia (see for example Hosokawa and Matsuoka 2008). The only scholarly reference to the sexual fetishisation of sound that I have come across to date is in Linda Williams' book *Hard Core* (1990, 125) in which she briefly discusses the 1981 film *The Sounds of Love*. Here she employs the term audiophile to describe someone who sexually fetishises sounds. However, this term is much more commonly linked to the preference for high-fidelity listening.

<sup>x</sup> French psychologist Alfred Binet (1887) was the first to shift the term fetish from a religious object to a sexual object.

<sup>xi</sup> BDSM is an abbreviation of bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism. The term 'kink' broadly signals various forms of sex play and sexual practices that are commonly thought to go beyond conventional notions of sex, as such, use of the term varies widely. These include BDSM and fetishism as well as dominance, submission, role-play and punishment such as spanking.

<sup>xii</sup> The following sites did not specify any terms of use, therefore, I can name them as examples of sites that make reference to aural and music fetish (accessed 22 December, 2010): [www.fetlab.com](http://www.fetlab.com); [www.informedconsent.co.uk](http://www.informedconsent.co.uk). There was also a Facebook group dedicated to 'music fetish' (accessed 22 December, 2010) however this appears to be inactive at present.

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