

Introduction

Nedim Hassan and Holly Tessler

Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, UK

Sounds of the Overground was a one-day colloquium held in April, 2006 at the Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, funded by the AHRC as part of its Collaborative Research Training Scheme. The primary remit of the grant programme was twofold. The first goal of the scheme was to provide postgraduates with an opportunity to create, host and organise an original academic event. Emerging out of this initial objective was the secondary and more substantial goal of creating an opportunity for postgraduate students from a number of different universities and across a variety of academic disciplines to present and pool their knowledge and research.

If these were the only two criteria against which to measure *Sounds of the Overground*, it must already be considered a clear success. Our event attracted participants from across the UK and Europe, from fields of study as diverse as popular music, acoustics and philosophy. In addition to our postgraduate attendees, we were privileged to have Professor Anahid Kassabian, the James and Constance Alsop Chair of Music at the School of Music, University of Liverpool as our keynote speaker. During her opening remarks, Kassabian suggested that consideration of the impact of contemporary musical experiences on human subjectivity is vital. She proposed that in many societies there has been a proliferation of what she terms ‘ubiquitous music’ – those types of recorded music that we rarely choose to listen to but that are present in various quotidian contexts; for example music played in supermarkets or other shops (Kassabian, 1999; 2002; 2006). Kassabian contends that such music has been frequently neglected in academic research, partly because of issues relating to agency – the people who hear this music are not usually those responsible for choosing and disseminating it. Yet, at the same time, perhaps mindful of Small’s (1998) assertion that we cannot separate ‘the music’ from human acts and from the contexts in which music is heard, Kassabian takes seriously peoples’ engagement with ubiquitous music. She considers how human subjects may engage with this music, what the consequences of this could be and why this type of music that is frequently designed to be in the background might be desirable for many. For while people might not choose to engage with these types of ubiquitous music in the same ways that they engage with songs they explicitly decide to listen to or concerts they attend, they do still have to *deal* with such music. Thus, although scholars have usually focused on primarily *intentional* music related practices (such as fandom or subcultural activities); Kassabian reminds us that it is still important to consider musical engagements involving recordings that are not necessarily chosen.

Kassabian’s keynote speech underlined the importance of both making problematic musical activities that were previously taken-for-granted and investigating how social, technological and cultural factors can influence such activities. It was this type of dual concern to de-familiarise musical events and activities, as well as to explore how various historical, socio-cultural, economic, political and technological shifts have influenced peoples’ musical experiences that provided the initial impetus behind the *Sounds of the Overground* colloquium. Indeed the title of the colloquium betrays the intentions of the organisers rather effectively. We were seeking papers that would not necessarily focus on so-called ‘underground’ musical activity, but, on the contrary, would examine music related phenomena that were apparently ‘overground’ already. In other words, we sought papers that would interrogate practices, events and concepts that were seemingly taken-for-granted; shedding light on their complexity rather than dismissing them.

However, during the symposium itself, we heard a number of further and innovative interpretations of this initial conceptualisation. Some attendees, for instance, took *Sounds of the Overground* in a literal sense – that is, of the daily sounds of the world around them: the pulsating hum of the train; of cars on the motorway; the ambient noise spilling out from a passer-by's headphones. These scholars are interested in exploring the way we interact and respond to the world around us; and similarly, how the world adapts to changes and technological advancements over time.

Another understanding of the colloquium's title came from symposium participants who sought to investigate the boldest, brightest, most memorable sounds in popular music and culture, looking at, for instance, the Eurovision song contest and the power of music in eliciting powerful emotional responses to political, cultural and social developments.

A final interpretive strand that emerged from our colloquium was one that originated with the researchers who sought to merge the philosophies that both underpin and divide the arts and the sciences. By looking critically and epistemologically at the notions of sound and music as well as implications of the idea of 'everyday' and quotidian practices, we heard new and innovative discussions of how popular music and culture challenge established discourses whilst simultaneously creating new modes of thinking and understanding.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, when tasked with the job of selecting and editing papers from the colloquium for this volume, we were somewhat daunted by the range and scope and depth of the works before us. Rather than publish a typical volume of proceedings, organised in some mechanical fashion, for instance, alphabetically by author or chronologically by order of presentation, we deliberately sought to organise the works that follow in a way that highlights the many different interpretations and intersections of the notion of the concept of *Sounds of the Overground*.

Accordingly, the chapter structure on which we agreed progresses from the micro to the macro levels of analysis, from the (literal) exploration of the role of music in everyday life to the most broadly defined and philosophical approaches to human understanding of the role of music and culture in the arts and sciences.

The first chapter of the book is Nedim Hassan's 'Singing to your Self'. In it, he looks at the critical roles of music and musical performance in the lives of a group of adults with learning difficulties. In this extended ethnographic study, Hassan draws the conclusion that the notions of 'self' and 'identity' are indisputably bound up with small, sometimes almost unconscious musical activities such as singing along to the radio or the playing of a favourite CD. Though this account explores musical experiences on quite an intimate level, the chapter reveals that even seemingly mundane musical activities are implicated in issues of social and political power. The small instances of domestic musical performing that are discussed may be momentary, but they can become pivotal to the social situations in which they are enacted; having the potential to provide insights into the self that are unattainable through other means. Through this research Hassan establishes a case for the need for further investigation into the role of music and musical activity in everyday life, as well as the study of people with learning difficulties.

The theme of the role of music and musical performance is carried into the second chapter, written by Barbara Anna Panuzzo. Her ethnographic study of 'the Jump Off', a London hip-hop night, also reveals the potential of musical performing to communicate self-identity in a complex and dynamic manner. Panuzzo makes clear that the combative hip-hop related cultural practices displayed at this event are significant because they mark the event as an arena for the negotiation of racial, sexual and gendered identities. Furthermore, Panuzzo locates these musical and dance practices as examples of a distinctive performance spectacle; not only one that cannot be divorced from its club-centred context, but also one that has to be considered in relation to wider hip-hop discourses mediated through film, television and radio programmes.

Gender and identity are ideas also addressed in Kimi Kärki's chapter, which looks into what he terms 'stadium stardom aesthetics'. By this idea, Kärki explores the relationship between the performance of live music and its aesthetic environments. Looking at case studies which include both historical and contemporary live stadium tours by acts like U2, the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd, Kärki establishes a link between the way music is performed and the architecture of sound and vision. He reaches a conclusion that far from being 'disposable', stadium rock shows are instead built on a sociological and cultural foundation that influences the practices of both performer and fan.

In the fourth chapter, Holly Tessler questions the relationship between the live performance of music to the local. Drawing on the Philadelphia Mummers' New Year's Day Parade as a case study, she contextualises vernacular musical performances within a broader historical, political-economic and cultural framework, with the aim of demonstrating how notions of local ethnicity and identity in Philadelphia are clearly forged through a local yet contested musical-folk tradition.

Also touching on the notion of music and politics, in Chapter 5 Hazel Marsh examines the life of Venezuelan musician, Alí Primera. This piece provides a strong reminder that musical activity can become instrumental to wider political struggles. In her discussion of the life of Primera, Marsh expounds that his songs have strong social and political resonance for many people in Venezuela. Within a social context in which many ordinary Venezuelans did not have access to economic and political power, Primera's simple songs connected with peoples' everyday lives to such an extent that they helped to create social bonds and to galvanise political movements.

Moving away from the consideration of musical activities within specific geographical areas, Chapter 6 engages with issues relating to the representation of place and locality in popular songs produced by British artists during the 1960s. In an approach which blends lyrical analysis, sociology and the semiotics of popular music, Emilia Barna addresses issues of Britishness and identity through a critical analysis of music by the Beatles and the Kinks. By employing Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, Barna explores the ways music and lyrics can communicate particular ideas and evoke emotions relating to place, childhood and nostalgia.

As the title of the colloquium suggested, we were interested in exploring peoples' experiences of *sounds* (musical or otherwise) in a variety of contexts. The final two chapters in this volume take up this challenge. Both Jonas Andersson's piece (Chapter 7) and that of Eleni Ikoniadou (Chapter 8) consider how contemporary music- or sound-related technologies have the potential to profoundly affect groups' or individuals' musical or auditory experiences in general. Andersson's chapter contends that the listening experiences of those who practice online file-sharing are at the forefront of social and political power struggles. Testing the theoretical limits of Walter Benjamin's notion of 'the aura', Andersson queries whether the intangibles of music consumption and fandom will endure in the face of changing technological, legal and sociocultural environments.

In the final chapter of the volume, Ikoniadou's work takes this notion a step further, looking at artistic, experimental and theoretical developments in the field of sonic perception, where the boundaries between humanity and technology are becoming increasingly blurred. She suggests that these new technologies and art forms may actually be contributing to the redefinition of human subjectivities.

Through all of these chapters, what materialises is a sense of how far-reaching and multi-faceted the study of popular music and culture is. More than simply a reification of celebrity and stardom, *Sounds of the Overground* demonstrates how central ongoing study of popular music and popular culture is to emerging research in the arts, humanities and sciences.

But what ultimately emerged from the one day *Sounds of the Overground* colloquium however, was a strong sense of the diversity of approaches that are required when researching human musical and auditory experiences. Although it has been stated by other scholars, the colloquium affirmed that studies relating to musical experiences are highly interdisciplinary (see Hesmondhalgh and Negus, 2002). Furthermore, its concern to interrogate cultural practices that may have been previously taken-for-granted aligned the colloquium within a tradition of scholarly research on everyday life in general.

The breadth and depth of works presented during *Sounds of the Overground* demonstrated the implications of the recent growth in areas of study which are explicitly concerned with examining the roles of music in everyday life. As Ben Highmore (2002) points out, many theorists of everyday life, from Freud to Marx, have sought to strip 'everyday' phenomena of their inconspicuousness, undertaking research that seeks to make the familiar seem strange (Highmore, 2002: 21). More contemporarily, DeNora's (2000) influential sociological study has made clear that even apparently mundane music-related activities, such as choosing to play a specific song when with a friend or partner, are highly significant resources for managing social situations and relationships. Likewise, Bull's qualitative research with users of personal stereos and iPods provides insight into the numerous values of engagement with such music technologies, not least in terms of how they enable users to more effectively manage their day-to-day lives (Bull, 2000; 2005). Many of the papers presented at the *Sounds of the Overground* colloquium and the chapters published in this volume are informed by this concern to interrogate 'the everyday' or that which is apparently 'familiar'.

However, although certain themes reoccur throughout the chapters that follow, (most notably those of identity, performance, history and technology), similarities between pieces should not be exaggerated. After all, what the colloquium also demonstrated was the richness and diversity of the research currently being conducted to investigate musical and auditory experiences. Methodological approaches utilised by the researchers attending the colloquium were derived from a range of subject areas including: anthropology; history; cultural studies; philosophy; architectural studies and musicology. Once again this illustrated the interdisciplinary nature of music related studies, but it also indicated the challenges scholars face within such a dynamic academic field. Therefore, above all, it was hoped that the colloquium underlined this dynamism, broadening the knowledge of its participants, while provoking debates and providing indicators of the directions future research might take. It is hoped that this collection of published proceedings might constitute a small contribution to the furthering of this process.

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