Streaming Sounds

Musical Listening in the Digital Age

MICHAEL JAMES WALSH

SOUND IN URBAN AND POPULAR CULTURE

ROUTLEDGE

STREAMING SOUNDS

In a time when music streaming has become the dominant mode of consuming music recordings, this book interrogates how users go about listening to music in their everyday lives in a context where streaming services are focused on not only the circulation of music for users but also the circulation of user data and attention.

Drawing insights directly from interviews with users, music streaming is explained as never merely a neutral technology but rather one that seeks to actively shape user engagement. Users respond to streaming platforms with some relishing these aspects that provide music to be drawn into daily activities while others show signs of resistance. It is this tension that this book explores.

This unique and accessible study will be ideal reading for both scholars and students of popular music studies, communication studies, sociology, media and cultural studies.

Michael James Walsh is an Australian sociologist and Associate Professor at the University of Canberra, Australia. His research interests include the sociology of interaction, the writings of Erving Goffman, cultural sociology, technology and music. A chief dimension of his research involves exploring the reception of communication technologies as they relate to and impact on social interaction.

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"In the space of less than twenty years, music streaming has evolved from a niche practice into a key mode of music distribution and consumption across the world. Never before has so much music been instantly available to so many people. There have been bountiful attempts to examine streaming from a music-industry perspective, but research on the everyday significance of streaming for music fans has lagged behind. As one of the first dedicated books on this topic, Walsh's *Streaming Sounds* is critically important reading for anyone interested in how music streaming is used as an everyday resource by music fans and in the presentation of self and the management of social interactions."

Andy Bennett, *Griffith University, Australia*

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INTRODUCTION

Streaming and the transformation of music listening

> It's just that gigantic-ness of it. So it's both good and bad. There's a positive side of it and there's the old getting lost in the… (laughs) down the rabbit hole, just scrolling and looking… I think it's integrated itself into my everyday life in which traditional ways of listening to music hadn't.
>
> *(Sue)*

> I enjoy the fact that it takes over and I don't have to do too much. So I enjoy the convenience of, you know 'Alexa play R&B' and it just happens without having to labour for it. So I think that's the biggest thing for me is the fact that it provides like… it does the work for me.
>
> *(Mia)*

> I almost feel like stuck in a rut…. I'm like, 'I actually do really want to find something new'. And I'll go out and find that. But even though it's not Spotify's fault, (laughs) I kind of feel a little… trapped in what I… in the world that I've set up for myself by listening to certain types of things. I guess, yeah, the algorithm promotes what you've already been listening to and only gives you often slight variations on what that is because it doesn't want to freak you out (laughs). And I guess that's its job. It can be a little limiting sometimes.
>
> *(Sophie)*

Streaming platforms provide listeners with seemingly limitless supplies of music to integrate it in ways previously unimaginable. For some, streaming offers a means of music discovery, allowing users to lose themselves in the adventure of finding new artists and songs. Inversely for others, it represents

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a way listeners delegate decisions about what music to listen to. For others, streaming limits musical possibilities, catering to preferences arrived at by algorithms. Streaming means different things to different listeners. But how users engage with streaming services changes the relationship listeners have with music, rendering it more integrated and pervasive across the everyday. Part of this transformation stems from the way streaming platforms afford listeners an easy way to use music ubiquitously. As David Bowie anticipated in 2002: 'Music itself is going to become like running water or electricity' (Pareles 2002). This echoes Paul Valéry's (1964:226) much earlier prognostication 'just as water, gas and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand'. In some ways, streaming cultures come to represent a version of this future, providing users of music streaming an easy, abundant, and almost seamless way of integrating music into their daily lives. Music may be said to flow like water, with listeners obtaining a perceived sense of control through an increased ease of use afforded by streaming services. At the same time, platforms assume a central mechanism as bottlenecks and gatekeepers in the circulation of music cultures (Sesigür 2021:34). Ultimately, the digitalisation, miniaturisation and networking of music recordings provided by streaming services allow users to adopt music in a ubiquitous fashion and expand what can be done with music. Assisting users to manage and inflect social space through music, streaming services also facilitate various forms of social interaction.

In 2016, music streaming platforms became the dominant mode of music distribution and consumption globally (Nowak and Bennett 2022:49; IFPI 2017). Global revenue figures in 2022 for the music streaming sector indicate an expansion of double-digit growth (+11.5%), reaching US$17.5 billion in revenue (IFPI 2023). Across different types of formats, streaming (including subscription and advertising supported) represents the highest proportion of the market at approximately 67% of the share of all recorded music, up from 65.5% the prior year (IFPI 2023). Prior to the pandemic, at the end of 2019, paid streaming accounts as captured in industry reports numbered 341 million across the globe, reflecting an increase of 24.1% in revenue (IFPI 2020). By the end of March 2023, Spotify alone reported 515 million monthly active users (Porter 2023).

These figures indicate that streaming has become central to the distribution, promotion, and consumption of recorded music. Listeners are less likely to own copies of recordings but adopt the role of users, renting access either via payment or through access to user data (Arditi 2019:620). Notwithstanding the notable resurgence and growth in vinyl consumption (Webster 2020:191), the material goods of a listener's music collection have declined in general significance (McCourt 2005). This coincides with a shift from music listeners

to music users (Arditi 2018:305). Music consumption is now predicated on a model of perpetual subscription (Arditi 2018:315) where streaming platforms collect detailed user data that allows for precise targeting and personalisation of content for users (Prey 2018:1087). Music platforms engage in two key types of exchange which means they operate in two types of markets: one focused on the circulation of music for users, the other on the circulation of user data and attention (Drott 2018:248). Compelled to provide data on the content they access, users enter implicitly into a transaction that relies on algorithmic personalisation to generate value (Kant 2020:201). This situation has implications for users given the use of these services are never simply neutral. Users must navigate platform gatekeepers that decide, filter, and select what to expose listeners to and which songs to direct to their attention (Bonini and Gandini 2019:3). Streaming infrastructures have come to impact music production, distribution, promotion, and listening, thus holding implications for the meaning of music as a form of communication in everyday life (Johansson 2020:316).

How ordinary users respond to this set of circumstances and listen to music in this environment is the focus of this book. Technologies and their materiality enable different ways of consuming music in different contexts (Nowak 2016a:29) and given the way streaming has become domesticated, it extends music's integration into everyday life. As the comments opening this introduction suggest, some users enjoy the endless quantities of music on offer while others relish the convenience of delegating their decisions to platform algorithms about what to listen to next. Recommendation systems driving streaming services are designed with these ideal types in mind. Ranging from 'lean-forward' listeners who like to fiddle with settings, actively engage the interface, and skip songs, to incurious listeners who 'lean-back' start the music and then leave the system alone (Seaver 2022:80). But as will be considered, users importantly may also shift back and forth between these different approaches, depending on how they intend to use music in the situation in which they find themselves. To understand the contemporary situation of music streaming, this user experience needs to be explored, to illustrate the significance of these services in the integration of music into our everyday routines.

Music listening and everyday life

The seemingly endless supply of music afforded by streaming services has made music a convenient aspect of everyday life (Lüders 2021). While using music as part of everyday life is far from novel, its function has been extended by communication technologies enabling individuals to claim music as their 'own'. In other words, streaming technologies build on previous formats of music recording that permit listeners to marshal acts of listening

in ways that provide 'personalised' experiences (Bull 2000; DeNora 1999; 2002; Gould 2004; Hennion 2001). They offer the ability to use music to undertake 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1983) throughout their everyday lives (Bessett 2006; DeNora 1997, 2000, 2003). This points to the important role music plays in its capacity to configure social environments, actions, social practices as well as the sense of identity of listeners (Bull 2007; DeNora 2013; Walsh 2011).

At the same time listeners have increasingly projected their personal qualities onto music, they have also become ubiquitous listeners. As Kassabian (2013:xii) proposes, the technologies that allow for this situation have existed for some time; radio, Muzak, the phonograph, hi-fi, transistor radios, tape decks, Walkmans, etc. have enabled ubiquitous forms of listening (see also Gopinath and Stanyek 2014). Kassabian (2013) identifies this phenomenon as a situation where people fill their days with music but in ways that no longer operate as a primary focus. Likened to ubiquitous computing, ubiquitous listening and its music is understood as blending into our social environments and taking its place without calling attention to itself; it follows listeners from room to room, building to building, and activity to activity (Kassabian 2013:10). Music recordings, therefore, are increasingly experienced and placed alongside various other activities. Given the convenient access to music afforded by music streaming, it appears that listening has become routinised as a secondary activity (Lüders 2021:2351). Listeners engage music alongside or simultaneously with other activities in one vigorous example of the nonlinearity of contemporary life (Kassabian 2013:9). Moreover, listeners also become predisposed to types of background music, habituated into a world where disattending to music is not just accepted but unremarkable with the normalisation of 'listening alongside' (Drott 2018:257). In this way, where streaming affords abundant forms of music, the meaning of music becomes contested and challenged by what functions it is supposed to perform (Nowak 2016b:22). As ubiquitous music is so entangled in the fabric of our everyday life, it also proves an elusive subject to research (Boschi, Kassabian and Quiñones 2013:8).

As music technologies become integrated into mobile media, they extend music's ubiquity as an accompaniment throughout daily life (Bull 2007; Walsh 2009). Culturally confirming music listening as a type of secondary activity, listening, while simultaneously undertaking other activities, becomes more commonplace (Weber 2009). Thus, the reception of recorded music, which was once a relatively restricted spatial activity (e.g., listening in specific parts of the home), allows music to be consumed in numerous situations while also normalising mobile listening practices (Weber 2009:69). The writings of Michael Bull (2000) and Shuhei Hosokawa (1984), for example, point to the early use of personal stereos where mobile listening practices allowed listeners to reclaim urban space by adopting privatised music 'on the move'.

But with the proliferation of music streaming, and the domestication of this technology, questions abound in terms of how users now go about listening alongside various everyday activities.

Music streaming platforms now claim to be more than providing the convenience of music anywhere, at any time. For instance, 'Spotify has a playlist to match your mood—not only in the morning, but at every moment of your day' (Spotify 2019). As Daniel Ek, co-founder and CEO of Spotify, has declared 'when I look at the future of music, I don't think scarcity is the model anymore. We have to embrace ubiquity—that music is everywhere' (Levin 2015). Streaming services therefore enable access to their content via a multitude of technologies to ensure music is everywhere: 'we're available on more than 2,000 devices that fit Spotify seamlessly into your life when they're coupled with our exciting and innovative features and integrations' (Spotify 2022). Users of these services can now stream music via an array of devices: web browsers, smart televisions, mobile phones, smart speakers, smart watches, gaming systems, AV receivers, smart bulbs, smart refrigerators, car audio and even via aeroplane entertainment systems. Nevertheless, as Nowak and Bennett (2022:43) suggest, while the widespread accessibility of streaming indicates its success in that it has become the primary way listeners engage with music, less is known about how people experience this integration of music when listening in these ways.

Importantly though this does not mean music being used across the everyday in this way is new (DeNora 2013:63). On the contrary, Tia DeNora argues music has for quite some time been mobile and therefore has been used in numerous sonic practices to inflect social space; from whistling at work to singing a lullaby or protest song. But as she (2013:63) goes on to suggest, digital technologies provide for the easy playback of music in ways that do not require the individual to perform two activities simultaneously (working and musicking). This arguably extends forms of sonic dissociation pioneered by earlier mobile music technologies like the portable gramophone, Walkman and the boom box (Gopinath and Stanyek 2014). This is because these technologies transform music across the everyday in two fundamental ways. First, digitisation allows for music's ubiquity and second, while the layering of public and private has always been possible through pre-digital means, digitised music, in addition to its miniaturisation, allows for countless more ways to musically inflect and manage social space (DeNora 2013:63).

The miniaturisation and digitisation associated with streaming transform the material culture of previous music formats. Hence, streaming affords the ability to configure music into daily activities that further intertwine its materiality. To investigate streaming cultures, it is necessary to explore these technologies within the network of materiality and in contexts of everyday life, which importantly link with the routines of users (Nowak 2014). Exploring music streaming from this perspective, and how users perceive

their use of these services, is crucial to understanding the social and personal significance of streaming cultures. While streaming technologies are far from isolated objects in that they build on and are integrated into pre-existing habits and cultures surrounding earlier music formats, their integration into digital networks further complicates how it is used as part of everyday life. Importantly those who stream music are not solely dominated by ubiquitous music and sounds now afforded by these platforms, and nor are users completely in control of the sounds that reach their ears (Nowak and Bennett 2022:96). It is this tension that needs to be untangled.

The networking of music listening and the presentation of self

The digitalisation and miniaturisation associated with music technologies represent important junctures in terms of how users integrate music across the everyday. But another crucial dimension of streaming is its networking (Hagen 2016). As a networked technology, streaming changes the experience of music listening. The social features associated with music streaming enable the possibility of connecting with and influencing others and can also be perceived as risky and intrusive if not managed appropriately (Hagen and Lüders 2017:657). Allowing users to engage digitally with each other provides an awareness of the music that others potentially consume. Music streaming services, therefore, increase the individual's 'response presence' (Goffman 1983:2) or social contact with others in that they enable the disclosure of 'personal information' individuals divulge about the music they consume (Zerubavel 1982). In this sense, when users of these services now listen, they hold open channels that connect them to networks of listeners in which contemporary sociality is potentially produced (Kassabian 2013:72). As music streaming services enable the social sharing of music, they prompt reflections on how music is used as something personal, contributing to social interactions, performance and impression management (Hagen and Lüders 2017:644).

Erving Goffman's (1959) approach to the study of interaction assists in understanding music streaming practices as users engage these services to digitally exhibit themselves (Hogan 2010). As Trevor Pinch (2010:423) observes, while Goffman is not usually directly concerned with the role of technology, his work nevertheless points to how interaction is embedded in mundane material objects and technologies; how these are arranged, change and can be central to the ways social interaction is performed and staged. In drawing on Goffman's approach, we can see how as a networked technology, music platforms allow users to present streaming information via user profiles and integrate their streaming with social media accounts. This results in streaming, and its associated information, potentially exposing to a wider audience, what previously may have been considered a user's privatised