



Phonography

Danpop Seminar

24 November 2023, kl. 13:15 – 16:00

Room 1584-126, Kasernen

Edison phonograph (1906)

Presenters:

Ulrik Volgsten (Örebro University)

Steen Kaargaard Nielsen (Aarhus University)

Mads Walther-Hansen (Aalborg University)

Introduction

Music has always been dependent on technologies to sound. Musical instruments being one example, electronic media another, and in recent years, even the body and the voice have been studied as technologies. In this seminar we would like to focus on a single technology of mass mediation: Phonography. Although the term refers to sound writing in general,

including representations of music on paper, it normally designates the inscription of sound on mechanical or digital media intended for reproduction. The inscription technologies slowly developed from the mid-1850s onwards, and from the early 1900s they became a major constituent of a mass mediated music culture. We would like to ask which consequences the spread of phonography had with regard to conceptions of what music was, how it influenced or created new modes of listening, and how specific technologies like electric recording, long playing records, and stereo worked in such contexts.

Commodifying the musical work: The record review in interwar Europe

Ulrik Volgsten (Örebro University, Sweden)

Twentieth century Europe saw the birth of a new newspaper genre. Starting in 1920, the French daily *Le temps* and, in 1924, the British *Times* published record reviews. In late 1923 the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* published its first record review, most likely influenced by the journal *The Gramophone*, which had started to publish reviews on a regular basis earlier the same year, devoting the magazine to the critical discussion and information about recorded music. The presentation will focus on reviews in the Swedish daily and how they came to foster a new attitude towards, not only music on record, but perhaps even more significant, solitary listening. Whereas media coverage in the press during the early decades was mainly negative, dismissing the music record as a cheap and lowly surrogate for the "real thing", this tendency changed as *Svenska Dagbladet* (followed by other dailies and journals) let professional music critics review recordings of classical music. The presentation highlights a thematic shift in the reviews during the interwar years, from a focus on the recording, towards the recorded music. It suggests that the reviews promote a focus on the *work* which elevates solitary listening to classical music on record in a way which not only secures the cultural prestige of a new way of listening, but also of what can be described as a new commodity – the classical music record.

Staging Édith Piaf in Full Dimensional Stereo:

Revisiting notions of new listening spaces in early stereo recordings

Steen Kaargaard Nielsen, Aarhus University)

By coincidence, the culminating stage in the career of France's most celebrated chanteuse, Édith Piaf (1915-1963), overlapped with a seminal advent in commercial record production, the introduction of stereo records. This paper revisits the phonographic 'sound staging' of Piaf both as a live performer and as a recording artist at the peak of her career as new and evolving aesthetic discourses on audio representation enveloped the commercial and cultural appropriation of stereo as "the new spatial palette of audio" (Anderson 2006). Whether materializing as intended representational realism in the sonic 'encapsulation' of a

specific performance space of a live event or in the re-imagining of ‘abstract’ listening spaces in studio productions, stereo added a substantial new spatial dimension to the phonographic soundbox (Moore 2012).

Anchored in the notions of ‘staging’ and ‘auditory perspective’ (Théberge et al. 2015), the paper explores the recording of Piaf’s 1961 recital at the Olympia music hall in Paris, an intensely mythologized event (Looseley 2015 & 2023). Comparing this live album with the concurrent studio versions of the same repertoire (including ‘Non, je ne regrette rien’), leads to reflection on how listeners were – and still are – invited to imagine and experience Piaf as a sonic construct in the presence of so-called ‘full dimensional sound’. The stereo spatialization alone of the complementing orchestral arrangements of conductor Robert Chauvigny, a key component in Piaf’s art often overlooked, seems to occasion a new dynamic of musical agency quite different from conventional mono, sparking our sonic imagination and affective responses anew.

Digital Coldness and Sonic Realism – Popular Music, Sound Technology, and Changing Sound Ideals (Mads Walther-Hansen, Aalborg University)

This paper expands on existing histories of recorded sound from production to reproduction to reception by exploring how the sound of popular music recordings and recording technologies are conceptualized by audio professionals and music journalists.

I will discuss how the conceptualization of sound quality reflects listeners’ sensory reality more broadly and how sound ideals are negotiated in relation to emerging music production and playback technologies – such as the improvement of multi-track recording technologies in the 1950s and 1960s and the transition from analog to digital recording and playback in the 1980s and 1990s.

Throughout the 20th century new ideals for ‘the good sound’ emerged. At the beginning of the century, the music industry aimed to create recordings and playback technologies that sounded realistic. In the middle of the century sound quality was more often described with multimodal metaphors (like when describing a sound as ‘warm’ or ‘soft’). These metaphors point to new forms of sensory ideals. It is argued that these emerging sound description metaphors reflect patterns of human imagination that govern everyday sense-making. Thus, they form an entrance to the study of sensory reasoning through history.