

“Reality” Audio: Challenging Our Perceptions

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I avoid and fear electronic music and even electronic amplification
because of the irreversible damage they may inflict on the nervous system.
- - Henry Brant¹

Asked about his fear of electronics in music, Henry Brant was matter-of-fact: “An acoustic source never sounds better through a loudspeaker.”² The final word, deliberate and unabbreviated, encapsulates the issue. Loudspeakers are today ubiquitous. In addition to stereo and public address systems, they are found in our cars and elevators, attached to our televisions and computers, and even *inserted into our ears*. Easily 99% of the music we hear today is by way of electronically amplified digital audio recordings. “Live” performances at an increasing number of clubs and concert halls are “enhanced” through sound reinforcement³ and in the not-too-distant future it may be all electronic music on Broadway—a staggering reality. Indeed, the co-dependant relationship of music and electronics *is* unhealthy and worsening.

Prior to commercial recordings (c.1889), all music was live and acoustically amplified. Even music boxes and player pianos were acoustic sources of sound. To have music alone or in groups, in the home or at a restaurant, at a social gathering or religious ceremony, indoors or out, it had to be created on location using acoustic instruments and voices. Musicians were amply employed, professional and amateur alike. Imagine—all acoustic sounds! In our modern era of electronic smoke and mirrors, we must continually remind ourselves that for tens of thousands of years, music was performed and enjoyed in “real time” by real people. In little more than a century, music unaffected by electronics is a species nearly extinct.

Electronically created music and amplification as aural reality is widely accepted without suspicion or skepticism. While TV and movie “realities” are routinely scrutinized and discredited, the music and digitally sampled sounds that accompany them are not. The reason: electronic media (loudspeakers) are how modern listeners experience music. One hardly ever considers unauthentic the sounds coming from a television, a ceiling grate, or bookshelf unit. Thus, our perception of tone color and dynamics, of phrasing and nuance, not to mention basic musicianship, have become inextricably linked to electronic amplification—how strange it is to hear a real person performing on an acoustic instrument!

Our shortcomings as live musicians are masked with the twist of a knob or the touch of a button, not to mention when our strengths go unnoticed due to buzzing and feedback. Of course, as recording musicians, “air brushing” is all but universally and enthusiastically embraced. Stories of “improvised” solos, recorded a few bars and a few choice licks at a time, come to mind. Miles Davis didn’t favor this method. Recordings where the “wrong” notes are “fixed,” come to mind. Vladimir Horowitz didn’t favor this method.⁴ “Live” recordings, where the bassist goes back and re-records his part in the studio, come to mind. Jimi Hendrix and his Band of Gypsies didn’t favor

¹ Henry Brant, *Henry Brant*, liner notes to CRI CD 827, Composers Recordings, Inc., New York, 1999.

² From a phone conversation with the author.

³ Including the venerable Village Vanguard and Metropolitan Opera House.

⁴ Horowitz said that his greatest performances were never note perfect. However, the original release of his “1965 Carnegie Hall Return Concert,” while keeping mistakes in the Bach/Busconi, included unacknowledged edits in the Schumann. Harold C. Schonberg, *Horowitz: His Life and Music*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

this method. Singers who lip-sync certainly come to mind... *Perhaps the real damage to our nervous system stems from such dishonesty.*

Cosmetic surgery, “cooked” books, padded resumés, anabolic steroids, forced smiles and propaganda are all attempts at skewing reality. The truth remains hidden. Isaac Stern once said, “Music is not about creating musicians, it’s [about] creating a civilized society.”⁵ This is because music is fundamentally honest. One cannot cheat Mily Balakirev’s *Islamey* or John Coltrane’s *Giant Steps*; one cannot hide in Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* or fake Otis Redding’s *Respect*; one cannot disguise an audition or pretend to compose. Unfortunately, technology has encroached on such basic truths. We must strive to limit the “dishonest” use of electronics and reclaim the integrity inherent in music making. In this way only will there be a chance to slow the eroding humanity of our art. This kind of damage is reversible.

To experience a live performance sans electronic amplification can be an epiphany. Some memorable opportunities include the Vienna Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall, Leon Parker at Bradley’s, the Riverside Chorale at Alice Tully Hall, Evan Parker and Ned Rothenberg at the Knitting Factory, and the Assad Brothers at the 92nd Street Y. Just thinking about these possibilities primes the senses for goose bumps! Acoustic performances broaden one’s perspective immeasurably and bond each of us to the shared human experience throughout the ages. Subtle nuances lost to technology are revealed in utter splendor and a deeper understanding of music is indelibly stamped on our aural memory, never to be erased. This is also an opportunity to experience the delicate intimacy of pianissimo and the warmth of sharing. Our ears will thank us for it (with no ringing afterwards) and our spirits will be uplifted!

James Browne, who ran Manhattan’s Sweet Basil sums up our current situation:

“You know, I really love Duke [Ellington] and Louis [Armstrong] and Miles [Davis] and Ben Webster and all those guys, but I like jazz best when I can hear it live—it is supposed to be spontaneous music. They’ve been saying jazz is America’s classical music, and it deserves respect. Well, now it’s America’s classical music. Thanks a lot. What do we do now?”⁶

We must budget time and resources to seek out meaningful acoustic live performances both near and far. Plan vacations around hearing acoustic artists. Start a concert series at your church. Organize an acoustic world music festival at the community center. Approach the owner of a local coffee shop about adding live jazz or folk music on Wednesday nights. *Make some acoustic music at home.* It can be done! We often demand of our politicians, business leaders, clergy, and sports figures to be role models for a civilized society. We must demand the same of musicians. Acoustic live music contributes an unparalleled model of integrity and honesty to our world community. It’s time we promote it as such.

⁵ Isaac Stern, *Musical Encounters*, Educational Broadcasting Corporation and the Hopewell Foundation, Inc., 2000.

⁶ David Hajdu, “Wynton’s Blues,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 2003), 54.