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Music, identity, and oblivion

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a feature of listeners' everyday interactions with popular music: the tendency to take vicarious pleasure in the production of such music by singing along, or miming the actions of the guitarist or drummer. Acts of mimicry such as these are examined via a consideration of the concepts of mimesis, catharsis, and – perhaps more unusually – possession. In this latter regard, parallels are drawn between contemporary acts of identification, such as playing air-guitar, and possession-trances, which have been a significant feature of a number of musical cultures throughout history. The conclusion is that pop/rock mime-play is a ritualistic means of engendering fellow-feeling within a context of relaxation and self-abandonment.

KEYWORDS

Music, memory, the body, identification.

Introduction

The opening credits of the film of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) contain a sequence in which the thirtysomething singleton is lying on the sofa of her one-bedroom London flat, smoking a cigarette and wearing red, penguin-emblazoned pyjamas. The scene is set for what is clearly a lonely night-in: Bridget listlessly watches an episode of *Frasier*, browses through a magazine, and fruitlessly checks her answerphone messages, accompanied all the while by Céline Dion singing the refrain to *All by myself*. As the song's chorus gives way to a gentle but highly chromatic piano interlude, Bridget gulps down a large glass of red wine and gives a slight, convulsive shake of her head. Clearly drunk, she plays air-guitar along to the song's instrumental section, picking out the delicate notes of a classical guitar, her right hand still holding the empty wine-glass, and a rolled-up magazine in her left standing in for the instrument's fretboard. As Céline Dion reprises the song's first verse, Bridget sings along, her melancholic state underpinned by the song's interesting modulation between major and minor keys: 'When I was young, I never needed anyone, and making love was just for fun – those days are gone...' She starts sobbing as she reaches the words of the title but, rather than break down in tears and so transform this into a moment of pathos, her arm-gestures become comically expansive and expressive, as if she herself were Dion, astride the stage of a football-stadium and belting out the penultimate chorus in what would normally be the song's sparsely-accompanied 'confessional' moment. As the power-ballad sweeps to its inevitable strings-laden crescendo, Bridget alternates between using the rolled-up magazine as a microphone and as a drum-stick – miming along to the final chorus and head-banging to the backing-track's huge, reverb-driven snare.

This paper is about the ways in which listeners identify with popular music. For reasons that I hope will become clear, I am including classical music within the ambit of the 'popular'. This identification can be expressed primarily with the lyrical content of a song, with the voice of a performer, or with the physical movements of musicians. Frequently, as is the case in the opening credits of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, these elements are combined into a gestalt of considerable affective power. Such musico-identificatory behaviours form part of the manifold 'rituals of relaxation and abandonment' whereby popular cultural texts are consumed (McRobbie, 2006, p.68). In common with paperbacks, magazines, television programmes, and films, but to an arguably greater extent, pop songs such as the one mentioned above operate in their capacity as texts via the interpellation of the subject. This is to say, in the case of music, that the listener is inserted, body and soul, into the very fabric of what they hear. In the ensuing ecstasy, the listening subject disappears only to be relocated within the music's ideological and textural confines. This kind of intense identification engenders individual oblivion while drawing upon collective memory; it straddles the line between here and there, now and then, presence and absence; it is both part of the everyday and a release from it.

Bodily identification

I will begin by considering the bodily aspects of musical identification, chief among them acts of performance-mimicry. Returning for a moment to the example cited above, Bridget Jones's histrionic physical response to *All by myself* is typical of what Simon Frith (1981) identifies as one of the key pleasures of rock music. He notes that 'one of the effects of the music is the vicarious experience of producing it, as listeners mime the movements of the guitarist, the drummer, or the singer'. He adds, however, that 'rock *pleasure* is a cultural as well as a physical matter', so that the impulse to play air-guitar, for example, as with most of our responses to music, is learned rather than innate (1981, p.15, *italics in original*). Frith observes, furthermore, that, among rock fans, acts of consumption are gendered: 'if male consumers identify with rock performers and do so publicly, collectively (...), female consumers are addressed, by contrast, as individuals, the potential objects of the performer's private needs' (1981, p.228). I will return to this issue later. For the moment, it is interesting to note that Bridget's response to the film's opening power-ballad represents something of a post-feminist reversal in this respect: significantly, we hear Céline Dion's cover of the song and not Eric Carmen's original 1976 version, and Bridget acts in much the same way as Frith, writing in the early 1980s, would have expected young men or boys to have behaved, though crucially perhaps, she – unlike them – is alone and in the privacy of her own living-room. Indeed, much of the humour of the scene derives from the fact that we are witnessing what we are led to assume would normally be a very private act. By being performed for the cinema-screen, then, Bridget's mime is ambiguous in terms of the public/private dichotomy, this of course being the key feature of the film's 'diary' trope.

What the sequence highlights is the fact that such mimicry and tomfoolery belong, for the most part, not to the concert hall – be it classical or pop – but to the rather more solitary and domestic musical space made possible by the advent of mechanical reproduction. As far back as 1926, the Minneapolis Phonograph Society reported that some of its members had taken to 'shadow conducting' (cited by Katz, 2004, p.59). In

this regard, the musicologist, Richard Crawford, offers a personal recollection of his father's double-life as a foundry supervisor by day and a would-be orchestra conductor by night:

Fairly early in my life, I became aware that my father would go into a room of our house that was glassed in, with opaque glass, and I would hear music coming out of that room. If I stood outside, I could see shadows moving inside (...). Now, my father... was not a musician in any sense at all. But I eventually put together what he was doing (...) when I saw him walk into the house one day with a baton. He was going into that room, turning on the record player and conducting. I imagine it must have been a very important experience for him

(Katz, 2004, p.59).

As Mark Katz (2004) notes in his history of recording, the phonograph gave non-musical men such as Crawford's father 'the possibility of self-expression through music, permitting them to do in private what they could not or would not otherwise do' (p.59). It thus offered the average American man a way to enjoy music physically and sensually without incurring the risk of being unmanly. It should be remembered that, in the bourgeois drawing-rooms of the preceding century, music had centred around the piano and had been largely the preserve of the females of the house.

It is interesting that, within what one assumes were largely male cliques, the essentially private and solitary fantasy of conducting an orchestra was able to gain a measure of public recognition so that, to some extent, it became a shared male pleasure. A further example of this is to be found amidst the somewhat vulgar and nationalistic spectacle of the Last Night of the Proms. The event, held annually in London's Royal Albert Hall, has, in previous years, seen ranks of fledgling conductors practising their art by standing behind the real conductor and pretending to address the orchestra themselves. The seriousness of their youthful intent as they shadow-conduct suggests their complete absorption in the fantasy of omnipotence and authoritarian rule that the figure of the conductor embodies (Small, 1998). The fact that these apprentice-conductors are almost exclusively male underscores Frith's point regarding the gendering of musico-identificatory expression. Young men, like those who shadow-conduct from the stage of the Albert Hall, have traditionally had far more licence to indulge in public acts of musical horseplay than their female peers, though there are signs, such as the *Bridget Jones* sequence, that this is changing.

A no less potent musical fantasy, and one too that has been predominantly male, is that of playing a rock or heavy metal guitar solo. In a way that parallels the trajectory of shadow-conducting, mimicking the physical gestures of a rock guitarist has made the transition from being a private and domestic pleasure to being a ritual of mostly male camaraderie. Air-guitar competitions have become an annual fixture in most cities, with Oulu in Finland now firmly established as the global capital of this unlikely subculture: the Air Guitar World Championships have been held there every year since the event's inception in 1996 (Watson, 2007). A team of Finnish scientists have even gone so far as to invent a 'virtual' instrument consisting of computer vision software that tracks the movements of an air guitarist's hands in order to produce a passable though nonetheless ludicrous imitation of a guitar solo (Knight, 2005). It is,

perhaps, apt in this context to quote Robert Walser (1993) from his book on heavy metal: 'The music is felt within as much as without, and the body is seemingly hailed directly, subjectivity responding to the empowerment of the body rather than the other way round' (p.45). Significantly, identification such as this is absent-minded, which is to say that it is predominantly physical and affective rather than intellectual, more a matter of tendency than choice, and, as we have seen with shadow-conducting, it includes the sound-worlds of both heavy metal and the classical symphony.

A further point is worth pursuing with regard to the parallels between what are, on the face of it, two quite divergent musical cultures. As variants of performance-mimicry, air-guitar and shadow-conducting form a bridge between the spheres of the professional and the amateur, between production and an almost equally active form of consumption. To mimic, for many would-be musicians, is to set out to do. An apt example of this, especially having mentioned Walser's book on heavy metal, is to be found in the documentary, *Some Kind of Monster* (2004), charting a turbulent couple of years in the life of the influential Los Angeles group, Metallica. Having parted company with bass player, Jason Newsted, the band sets about promoting their forthcoming album – recorded without him – by inviting fans to an open rehearsal in which they are given the chance to stand in on bass as they run through songs from their formidable back-catalogue. The gusto and aplomb with which fans, both male and female, take up the challenge contrasts superbly with the founding members' jadedness as they rattle through numbers like *Search and destroy* for the umpteenth time in their careers.

The point to be made here is that acts of musical mimesis and the vicarious, often cathartic, pleasures they offer are not confined to music fans and the sphere of consumption but are central to the *production* of musical culture. An artist needs to imitate before they can innovate: they must take on someone else's identity before they can establish their own. So the entire history of popular music could be characterised as one of more or less deliberate plagiarism, pastiche and stylistic imitation, from the mutual borrowings between opera and popular song to the extended transatlantic dialogue that constitutes the history of rock 'n' roll. On this latter point, the crucial act of mimesis was that carried out by white artists in order to appropriate the movements and sounds of black artists. The ambiguous tribute paid by white musicians to their black counterparts – ambiguous because black artists often were never properly credited for their work, and what was often being celebrated was their imagined otherness – has, of course, a much longer history than that of rock 'n' roll, stretching back at least as far as the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century and the other 'blackface' performances that had preceded them. I will return to the complex borrowings and identity-issues vis-à-vis black and white musicians when I come to consider presence and absence, and the importance of their interrelationship for an understanding of how identificatory behaviour operates.

Frith (1996) underlines the implicit connection between musical consumption and production, especially with regard to the human voice, by drawing attention to the innervated muscularity of many of our modes of listening: 'we listen by performing, by reproducing (even if only silently, tentatively) those muscular movements for ourselves, "sympathising" with a singer by pushing the words up against the top of our mouths when she does' (p.192). As Roland Barthes (1977) puts it: 'I am

determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic' (p.188). The supra-significatory 'grain of the voice' which Barthes famously heard elicits, for Frith (1996), a literal 'physical sympathy', with the singer (p.192). This is, in large part, due to the fact that, as organisms with the same glottises and tracheas, most of us can identify with singers to a greater degree than we can with musicians, whose dexterity far exceeds our own: 'we can sing along, reconstruct in fantasy our own sung versions of songs, in ways we can't even fantasize instrumental technique – however hard we may try with our air guitars – because with singing, *we feel like we know what to do*' (Frith, 1996, p.192, italics in original). And for those professional musicians who have developed a high degree of muscle-memory in relation to their chosen instrument, listening to recordings of someone who shares the same specialism can trigger peculiar sets of involuntary motor responses, for instance, in the case of the sax-player whose lips twitch and quiver when they listen to another saxophonist play a solo (Storr, 1992).

Rather than being solely a history of disembodiment then, the history of sound-recording is also one in which the body discovers new prosthetic capabilities and new dimensions of affective experience.

Psychological identification

Perhaps 'linguistic' rather than 'psychological' identification would make for a better subheading as my concern in this section of the essay is with how listeners relate to song-lyrics. Nevertheless, the title is warranted by the fact that the lyrics of songs, for being sung, differ in important respects from the same words merely spoken or on the page. As Frith (1996) notes, 'the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance': 'a song doesn't exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song' (p.166). The implications of this for identification with pop songs is that the act of listening very often becomes a proxy performance in which the lyrics function within a subtly modified set of speech acts determined by the listener. Frith (1996) sums up this kind of musical role-playing in the following terms: 'The musical pleasure lies in the play we can make of being addressed (...) and addressing, taking on the voice as our own, (...) physically, (...) emotionally and psychologically, taking on (in fantasy) *the vocal personality* too' (p.198, italics in original).

The lyrics of pop songs, almost without exception, encourage these kinds of fantasies through their modes of address. The subject of what is being enunciated, that is of the words themselves – as opposed to the enunciating subject, in this case the singer – is overwhelmingly an unspecified 'I' that the listener can imagine him- or herself being. Similarly, the 'you' that is addressed is an empty cipher which the listener can easily fill. In a survey of lyrics from the top fifty songs in English from the 12 September 1987 edition of *Music & media's* Hot 100 chart, Tim Murphey (1989) found that forty-seven out of the fifty contained an unspecified 'I'-referent, and thirty-two an unspecified 'you'-referent. Thus, from a sample the date of which was chosen ahead of time in order to be as representative as possible, it was confirmed that pop songs' almost exclusively have an open mode of address that facilitates auditor-identification and role-play. Murphey (1989) is understandably cautious about the extent to which listeners may or may not place themselves in the role of either the 'you' that is being

addressed or the 'I' that is doing the addressing, but he suggests that such role-play might occur via the song's ability to circumvent rational responses: 'Although our logic tells that it is not possible that we are being addressed directly, subconsciously (and perhaps illogically) we may receive the messages as directed toward us' (p.186). Thus, 'to the extent that the auditor is permeable to the song's influence, the 'you' and 'I' take on personal meaning for present, remembered, idealised or desired affective relationships, consciously or unconsciously' (p.190). Murphey takes the example of a song belonging to the era – that of the eighties – in which he was writing: 'every American youth knows Bruce Springsteen sings "Born in the USA", [but] when they hear it and sing along they also are exclaiming that they were "Born in the USA"' (p.187).

A more personal and candid example is to be found amidst the transcripts of interviews conducted by the State University of New York's 'Music in daily life project'. When asked what he does when he's listening to music by himself, a fifteen-year-old interviewee, named Edwardo, replies: 'I lip-synch it in the mirror. I pretend I'm doing a movie. Kind of embarrassing, but I do that' (Crafts *et al.* 1993, p.52). Curiously, though not unusually, Edwardo's bedroom-mirror allows him to play the roles of addresser and addressee simultaneously: he is constructed as both the 'I' and 'you' his very own rap-video.

In Jakobsonian terms, the 'I' of song-lyrics is 'emotive', acting as a vehicle for self-expression, whereas the 'you' has a 'conative' or vocative function, addressing the auditor directly. As Richard Middleton (1990) has demonstrated, these communicative functions – Jakobson (1986) lists six in total – work in concert with the non-lyrical features of the song. For example, a pronounced vibrato or melisma on the word 'I' will be heard – according to the coding implicit in Western genres – as more emotive than a single, unwavering tone, and a 'you' on the downbeat is liable to have more conative force than one on an unstressed beat. (Whitney Houston's version of *I will always love you* gives ample evidence of the use and abuse of these two musico-lyrical modes of communication, to the point where the song-title almost becomes a threat.) These musicological, as opposed to purely literary, features of the text help to explain a song's subconscious force in eliciting identification and role-play. We commonly respond to popular songs at an affective level that we would struggle to even notice let alone explain in words, yet, precisely because of this fact, 'silly love songs' and their ilk engage us all the more. In simple terms, we are most conducive to adopting other subjectivities – and the ideologies implicit in them – when we relax and desist from the arduous process of constructing and maintaining our own. I will return to this matter when I come to discuss the intertwining of individual oblivion and collective memory.

For now, the issue of ideology needs pursuing. Dave Laing (1969) associates the personal mode of address, typical of ballads such as *I will always love you*, with the attenuated emotional life of late bourgeois society and its regressive flight into sentimental fantasy (cited in Middleton, 1990, p.237). Within this possessive individualist milieu, collective modes of address are usually disdained in favour of the first- and second-person singular. Murphey (1989)'s sample of chart-hits from a single week in 1989 certainly evidences the continuation of this trend. Laing (1969, 1985) cites rock 'n' roll and other 'subcultural' styles as notable exceptions, with their plural terms of address such as 'come on everybody' and 'we all shine on', etc.

(cited in Middleton, 1990, p.237). Similarly, Frith (1981) comments on the Beatles' extensive use of the third person throughout their careers, from *She loves you* to *Something*. Unlike many of their peers, the Beatles frequently declined to objectify their fans as the addressees of the group's songs, opting instead for a more narratological approach that included rather than cajoled their listeners, as if guiding them through a collective perambulation between markedly diverse structures of feeling.

What these different modes of address have in common is the function of 'interpellation', whereby listeners are designated varying subject-positions within the musical text (Middleton, 1990, p.242). Obviously, this occurs more readily within the personal mode of 'you' and 'I' as the open-endedness of such emphatically employed referents invites completion by the auditor. As Murphey (1989) writes, 'the listener would seem to be able to complete the message, or make sense of the song, through using the persons, times and places from their own physical and metaphysical situation' (p.185). Yet, in spite of this apparent hermeneutic freedom, pop-lyrics exert considerable ideological influence due to the fact that their message is completed within certain parameters: the listener (mis-)recognises him- or herself within the terms set by the song. Moreover, the subject-position that he or she discovers for him- or herself in the musical text has a pleasing unity, which ordinary subjectivity, by its intermittent and fragmentary nature, cannot supply. So, in a sense, identification at this level is about the adoption of a ready-made personality: one whose specious facticity and affective charge is able to temporarily supersede our more humdrum notions of selfhood; and this personality is supplied by and through ideology.

One of the most persuasive accounts of the power of the singing voice to elicit identification is to be found in the work of Sean Cubitt. Identificatory processes are at the heart of his account of musical culture in the age of recording: 'The singers who populate our fantasies, the songs we can't get out of our heads, have meanings that reach into our most intimate sense of ourselves' (2000, p.142). The meaning of a song is, in this sense, a matter of its social production rather than its formal musicological characteristics. Instead of inhering in the musical text as a set of timeless, synchronic qualities, signification is constructed anew in the diachronic act of listening, specifically in relation to the song's lead vocal and the subject-positions it affords, the way it locates us as listeners in the unfolding musical fabric. The ideologies of popular songs and the semiotic processes they are founded upon are thus inextricably bound up with the production of subjectivities:

any act of signification, any Symbolic action, must also be ideological. And any ideological function must in turn depend upon the construction of a subject of that ideology. Thus the *sine qua non* of the diegetic and ideological function of the song is the production of the subject and its position
(Cubitt, 2000, p.154).

Genre has an important role to play in this regard, confirming the listener's expectations and, with them, their sense of identity:

In so far as the musical conventions involved are familiar to the listener, in so far as they make the song re-cognizable, the song creates the conditions within

which the listener can be a conscious subject: I listen, therefore I am.
Consciousness is present, in short, as an effect of musical language
(Cubbit, 2000, p.151).

One might have concerns about the excessively nominalist slant of Cubitt's argument here but the point is nevertheless a cogent one: that aesthetic reception relies upon locating markers of convention and our relationship as interpellated subjects to those markers, just as much as it does upon identifying markers of difference and the points where convention breaks down or is challenged.

Using the insights of Lacanian theory, Cubitt traces the movement of desire as the listener follows the vocal line of a song. Rather than being a simple matter of the listener responding empathetically to a personality embodied for them in the singer's voice, identification is riven by a sense of lack due to the logic of representation itself:

Wherever there is representation, the object represented is absent (...). The subject is represented in language only by the fact that representation relies on the absence of the thing represented. The subject's presence in the song is in fact an absence, a lack

(Cubbit, 2000, p.156).

The act of listening therefore becomes 'the pursuit of that impossible reality along the trace of the singing voice': 'desire is radically unable to coincide with whatever there is in play in the field of consciousness because consciousness, the ego, is founded in representation, where nothing signifies that is not a lack' (Cubbit, 2000, p.157). Thus, in attending to the singing voice, '[w]e hear both representation (presence) and its object (absence)' (Cubbit, 2000, p.158). Lacanian alienation occurs at two levels here: firstly, at the level of the singer, who is divided between their presence as artist and their presence in the musical text; secondly, at the level of the listening subject, who is similarly torn between their presence to themselves as listener and their implied semiotic presence in the song. This means that, in identifying with the singer, by singing along, for example, our presence as a subject is simultaneously constructed (within the terms set by the song) and elided (in terms of our identity as a mere auditor). The constructed or interpellated subjectivity of the song, for being conventional, is a form of collective or ideological memory; the temporary swoon or dissolution of the listening subject is characterised by individual oblivion.

This brings me to a discussion of presence and absence more generally in relation to musico-identificatory affect.

Presence and absence

Cubitt's point that 'representation relies on the absence of the thing represented' raises interesting issues for musical representation (if indeed such a thing exists: musicians and critics alike have long argued over whether music is a robustly representative art or a purely formal one). As far as presence/absence is concerned, one of the contentions of Western art-music, particularly in its period of consolidation, the nineteenth century, has been that the composer is somehow

spectrally present in each performance of his or her work. Edward Said (1991) expresses this idea thus:

performance of a work of music aims at identity (...). Because the work unfolds in, indeed is irrecusably tied to, duration or passing time, it can be listened to as if (the phrase is meant to underline the provisionality of the experience) from the point of view of its creator, as if he or she was composing it during that time. This is of course an illusion
(p89).

Christopher Small (1998) detects something supernatural in this unavowed belief that performances in the concert hall can invoke the spirit of a Beethoven or a Mozart: 'In charge of the ceremony is the conductor; he is the magus, the shaman, who immerses himself in the sacred book and summons up the spirit of the dead composer' (p.87). What Small does is to anthropologise the performance of the classical repertoire, treating the purpose-built concert hall as a ritualistic space set aside from all quotidian concerns. The metaphysical presence of the dead composer during a performance is assumed by audiences just as readily as they assume that most of the composers whose work will be performed will be dead. The long-deceased composer occupies a liminal space for the duration of the performance, between their ideal presence and their material absence. The score meanwhile is a ledger of physical traces left behind by the composer from which his subjectivity, his essential inwardness can be reconstituted. It thus represents on the page, not just patterns of sound, but presence. In other words, the composer is represented by virtue of his being absent.

In a comment that extends to recorded music, Andrew Goodwin (1998) makes a similar point to those of Said and Small regarding the mirage-like impression of presence: 'the intimacy of music, its ability to get under our skin, is founded at least in part on the illusion of *shared time* spent with the performer and/or composer' (p.133, italics in original). The advent of recording obviously constitutes a further problematisation of the issue of presence/absence, yet it does this in slightly unforeseen and contrary ways, especially with regard to the human voice. One might have expected the figure of the performer to have receded once their physical presence was no longer a pre-condition for music to be heard. But Edison's phonograph and the multifarious contraptions that followed in its wake have resulted not so much in the straightforward disembodiment of the performer but in a cathected fantasy of his or her presence, of 'shared time' in Goodwin's words. Paradoxically, and as Theodor Adorno (1982) noted in his essay on 'musical fetishism', recorded sound emphasises rather than elides the personality of the performer (p.277). Contrary to Walter Benjamin (1999)'s implied thesis in *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, recorded music is more auratic, not less.

The ambiguous intimacy that characterised responses to the gramophone is captured perfectly in the pages of Thomas Mann's novel, *The magic mountain* (1924). Ensconced in the rarefied geographical and intellectual climate of a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps, the story's young protagonist, Hans Castorp, encounters an example of the new 'musical apparatus' or 'wonder-box' for the very first time. His reactions to the new mode of listening it engenders are telling and precise. Initially, Castorp thrills to the record-player's ability to produce an ethereal abstraction of the human voice, free from all personal encumbrances:

These singers male and female whom he heard, he could not see; their corporeal part abode in America, in Milan, Vienna, St. Petersburg. But let them dwell where they might, he had their better part, their voices, and might rejoice in the refining and abstracting process which did away with the disadvantages of closer personal contact (....)

(Mann, 1924, p.642).

Yet in spite of the voices' newly acquired spirituality, Castorp is still able to hear their more sublunary characteristics too. The 'abstracting process' effected by the mechanical mode of audition still leaves the singers' voices with

enough appeal to the sense, to permit of some command over their individualities, especially in the case of German artists. He could distinguish the dialect, the pronunciation, the local origin of these; the character of the voice betrayed something of the soul-stature of individuals, and the level of their intelligence could be guessed by the extent to which they had neglected or taken advantage of their opportunities

(Mann, 1924, p.642).

In the case of a recording of Verdi's *Aida*, which he listens to repeatedly, Castorp feels something like a personal affinity with the opera's principal singers – '[t]he incomparable tenor, the royal alto with the wonderful sob in her register, and the silver soprano' – as well as with the characters they play, to the point where he experiences 'a familiar fellow-feeling that increased every time he listened to this set of records, until it amounted to infatuation' (p.643). Castorp's growing obsession with 'the tragic fate of Radames, Amneris, and Aida' is due in large part to the general characteristics of the new listening experience which the gramophone allows: its iterability, and perhaps also what Adorno termed its 'isolated moments of enjoyment' (Mann, 1924, p.643; Adorno, 1982, p.273). Rather than appreciating the unfolding musical structure as might otherwise happen if the opera were not spread over many separate discs, Castorp responds instead to fleeting nuances such as the alto's 'wonderful sob' (though, in fairness, he also studies the opera's plot in order to gain an appreciation of each of its scenes, which, for him, must be dramatised in his imagination). In other words, what Castorp does is hook his attention onto the personalities, as he perceives them, of the different singers and their characters.

No sooner do disembodied voices issue forth from recordings than they are fleshed out in the mind's eye – and ear – of the listener. As Frith (1996) puts it, when we hear recorded voices, 'we assign them bodies, we imagine their physical production' (p.196). For Frith, 'this is not just a matter of sex and gender, but involves the other basic social attributes as well: age, race, ethnicity, class – everything that is necessary to put together a person to go with a voice' (p.196). Like Hans Castorp, we conduct instantaneous social categorisations of the recorded singers we hear, usually without even thinking about it. We bring to life who they are for us as people, and we do this via our implicit knowledge of the musical code. This is to say, the conventions as to how certain voices are 'supposed' to sound inform our judgements of exactly what type of person is singing – far more so than any of the vocalist's alleged 'natural' features (haven't we all mistaken a male voice for a 'female' one, or a white voice for

a 'black' one, or vice versa?). Frith (1996) wryly remarks that even the sound of a 'disembodied voice' is conventionally coded as female, as in the case of the Cocteau Twins' Elizabeth Fraser (p.196).

To reiterate my previous point: in the physical absence of the performer, his or her *implied* presence becomes more important. And this is largely what the art of record production rests on, even – or especially? – in the case of those overdubbed recordings which would not be possible to reproduce in live performance, such as when a lead singer accompanies his- or herself on backing vocals. Reverb gives the impression of a singer occupying an actual acoustic space, and switching between left and right channels creates the illusion of their physical movement. But by far the most important yet rudimentary apparatus in generating the illusion of a performer's presence is the electric microphone. Its ability to pick up 'soft', 'close' sounds produced a new impression of intimacy, both in public performance and on record (Frith, 1996, p.187). In this regard, Robert O'Meally notes the importance of the microphone for the development of Billie Holiday's vocal style. Her personal mode of address 'as she moved from table to table in speakeasies' was to be heard on her records too: 'Whether in clubs or on recording dates, she continued to deliver her lyrics as if only for one or two listeners whom she addressed face to face' (O'Meally, 1991, pp.31-32). The so-called 'crooners' too, such as Bing Crosby, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra, adapted their vocal style in recognition that, as singers, the microphone was 'their instrument' (Sinatra cited by Rockwell, 1984, p51). As a young singer, Sinatra worked hard to perfect his microphone-technique, eliminating extraneous sounds such as excessive sibilants and noisy in-breaths by moving in and out of range of the microphone accordingly (Rockwell, 1984, pp.51-52). In the recording studio, a small mesh screen placed between the singer's mouth and the microphone automatically filters out many such sounds. Yet, in recordings of other singers, these vocal superfluities are often consciously retained in order to signify the singer's immediate bodily presence. On the chorus of the Beatles' *Girl*, for example, one hears John Lennon take a sharp intake of air before each of his long, melismatic sighs on the word 'girl...'. Such creaturely noises, which would simply not register in the context of a live performance, are able to elicit a thrill of recognition when heard on record.

The irony of this is that the 'live' qualities of certain kinds of music are more easily disseminated via electrical reproduction than by direct performance. This has been the case especially with the music of black America. The emphasis on 'immediacy of communication' in jazz, for example, was not generally available until it could be heard on record (Frith, 1981, pp.16-17). And as Michael Chanan (1994), among others, has noted, 'many jazz musicians who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s have spoken of how they first developed their instrumental technique by copying records' (p.271). In the blues milieu, even supposedly 'original' and 'authentic' figures from the Mississippi Delta, such as Robert Johnson, honed their craft partly by imitating what they heard on records and the radio, as, of course, did white bluesmen such as Eric Clapton, some thirty years later (McClary, 2000, pp.53-54).

Pop identification as possession ritual

This brings me back to the problematic issue of white identification with black artists, particularly in the case of the early history of rock 'n' roll. Frith (1996) observes that '[t]he racism endemic to rock 'n' roll was not that white musicians stole from black culture but that they burlesqued it' (p.131). Accordingly, Bernard Gendron (1985) has argued that it seems 'reasonable to place [Jerry Lee] Lewis's "Whole Lotta Shakin" in the tradition of black-faced minstrelsy':

If 'Whole Lotta Shakin' was to succeed in advertising itself as *white-boy-wildly-sings-black*, it had to do so quickly and simply. The result had to be a coarsely outlined cartoon of what it means to sing black. That is, the result had to be a caricature

(cited by Frith, 1996, pp.130-131, italics in original).

In parallel to this, 'gospel and r&b and doo-wop' were themselves '*blacked-up*' (Frith, 1996, p.131, italics in original):

The black pioneers of rock and roll were also driven to produce caricatures of *singing-black*. Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Ray Charles... quite radically changed their styles as their audience shifted from predominantly black to largely white. Though all three began their careers by singing the blues in a rather sedate manner (at least by rock and roll standards), they later accelerated their singing speed, resorted to raspy-voiced shrieks and cries, and dressed up their stage acts with manic piano-pounding or guitar acrobatics

(Gendron, 1985, cited by Frith, 1996, p.131, italics in original).

The tensions inherent in what Frith (1981) calls 'the relationship between black performance and white pleasure' are thus a tangle of projected otherness and identification with that otherness (pp.22-23). In its charged affectivity and exhibitionism, this identification conforms, in certain respects, with Gilbert Rouget's account of possession rituals in his book, *Music and Trance*. For Rouget (1985), '[p]ossession is essentially identification with another' (p.225).

Among the many contemporary and historical examples of possession that he looks at, Rouget examines the available literature on the Dionysus cults of Ancient Greece. In accounts of music's role in possession and other trance-states, Rouget identifies a common misconception extending back to the work of Aristotle: the belief that music in itself is the direct cause of trance. For Aristotle, the Phrygian scale – probably heptatonic – was 'the mode of madness' whereas the Dorian – probably pentatonic and without semitones – was the mode of 'serenity' (Rouget, 1985, p.223). While not denying that music – particularly amplified music – can have immediate psycho-physiological effects, Rouget draws attention to music's status as a semiological system and its role within possession rituals as 'a coded signal' (1985, p.205). In spite of the fact that 'the music of enthusiasm or Dionysiac *mania* was strongly felt to be Phrygian', he argues that it was not any innate quality of Phrygian melody that contributed to ecstatic states but rather its association with Asia Minor, from whence it was also believed the Dionysiac cult itself originated (p.91) (In contrast, the Dorian mode was considered stoutly Hellenic). Similarly, it did not much matter what kinds of instruments were used in the ceremonies: the *aulos*, or double clarinet, was most

commonly employed, but the Pan flute, or *syrinx*, and the lyre were also played (pp76-77). What was required was something that sounded suitably exotic, for the God that the maenads, or revellers, sought to invoke was, in simple terms, a foreigner. In this regard, Rouget asks:

what in fact is possession other than an invasion of the field of consciousness by the *other*, that is, by someone who has come from elsewhere? Insofar as he is the other, Dionysus is at the same time an elsewhere; whether he is or not really is of little importance

(1985, p93).

Interestingly, Rouget (1985) suggests that 'Beatlemania' and other forms of contemporary idol-worship might represent a continuation of 'the poetic tradition of mania', in which states of enthusiasm and hysteria are the norm (p.241). However, it is in precisely this regard that the word 'entertainment', by which we commonly understand musical culture, becomes such a nullifying category. 'Ritual', I think, would be a far better one, as the term helps to expose social life's gestural and affective foundations, even if what we are talking about are merely 'rituals of relaxation and abandonment' (McRobbie, 2006, p.68). Karaoke (literally 'empty orchestra') provides a good example in this respect. What began in the early 1970s as a means for allowing drunken – dare we say bacchantic? – Japanese businessmen to sing along to pop songs more effectively, has since become a ritual for traversing the dichotomies of the global and the local, the personal and the public, and the mundane and the extraordinary. For Tia DeNora (2000), in her study of music in everyday life, karaoke provides 'a framework for the organization of social agency', structuring public conduct largely via participants' adoption of different personae (p.17). One of DeNora's interviewees, a karaoke host from Exeter, Britain, puts it thus: 'whatever music we play they tend to react as different individuals [i.e. in character]' (p.17). Without wanting to stretch the parallels too far, the most successful karaoke artists – those who are least awkward and self-conscious – are the ones whose 'possession' by their chosen idol is the most heartfelt and complete.

As has been made clear, karaoke and the manifold other musico-identificatory acts, such as playing air-guitar, shadow-conducting, or lip-synching, are frequently physical, affective and mimetic. They are certainly stereotyped, that is, socially acceptable, but often no less sincere. In this respect, they share much in common with the typical forms of trance-behaviour of other cultures. But, if they have one at all, what is their function? I have already mentioned catharsis, but the term is too general in this context and suffers from overuse. However, if we are to take the parallels with possession rituals seriously, then the kinds of identification and mimicry I've been referring to would effect a species of 'healing', or a reintegration of the individual into his or her surroundings. In this context, the role of music and dance is, in Rouget (1985)'s words, 'to reconcile the torn person with himself':

healing is achieved by the reinsertion of the individual in society as a result of the movement of music and dance, which provokes identification with the [possessee's] god

(1985, pp.206, 212).

Likewise, in the avowedly secular context of music therapy, the therapeutic value of music would seem to reside less in any intrinsic value it might have and more in its ability to socialise us.

Individual oblivion and collective remembering

To pursue the nature of this ‘healing’ further, I would characterise it as supreme unselfconsciousness: a kind of passing away in the midst of life, in which the absence of the individual is grasped as collective presence. Conceived of anthropologically, musical identification allows for shared somatic states, shared ‘rhythms of interaction’ that give rise – even in the absence of other listeners – to fellow-feeling (Blacking, 1977, p.9). In musical cultures, then, individual oblivion coincides with collective memory. Being a form of oblivion, though, we can never know we know, can never be present to our own presence. ‘Our own presence’ is, in fact, a chimera. There is only presence. The illusion of one’s own presence is ego, is thought, in language. In the interstices of language, presence resides as a nothingness, an emptiness of being, the empty space of the ever-present.

So, in slight contention with Leo Charney’s intriguing and insightful argument in *Empty moments* (1998), I would suggest that it is not so much that presence doesn’t exist but rather that the moment we stop to arrest it, it is gone, and this is precisely the dilemma of musical presence. I am aware that this, in Charney’s terms, is something of a rearguard action consistent with the residual idealistic befuddlement of otherwise materialist thinkers such as Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger. But at the risk of being in the grip of an unfashionable metaphysics, I would maintain that presence cannot be conceived of as pure delusion.

Presence is the fleeting hollow of oblivion, in which we forget ourselves in order to remember what is real. Ultimately, we can never know reality or presence, we can only be it.

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