INSIGHT

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Music to our ears

> **In an age of AI-produced visual art, the balance between robots and recordings might yet shift again.**

SINCE the web mania of the Nineties, they'd dreamed it was up there, a thousand miles above the Earth, packed with technology. "From the heavens," anthropologist Nick Seaver writes, "the celestial jukebox would allow anyone, anywhere, at any time to listen to anything ... a musical utopia in which listening would be seamless, effortless, and bountiful".

Computing Taste, Seaver's study of music recommendation technologies, offers a critical take on such fantasies of unconstrained, unabating access – and of the sense, on which services like Spotify rely, that there is "too much out there" for anyone to make meaningful sense of without algorithmic support.

Seaver's work gives deep historical context to this anxiety, rendering it as a myth which dates back to eighteenth century booksellers complaining that a "plague of books" threatens the national intellect and even the Roman stoic Seneca, for whom "the abundance of books is distraction".

As Seaver puts it: "The idea that opening a music streaming service today and there's 40 million songs waiting for you is a problem is actually kind of weird!"

Seaver works at the intersection of tech and culture, exploring how these terms are understood by the people designing and building today's digital infrastructure and services. Initially, the ethnographic fieldwork in Silicon Valley presented unique challenges. Not only were there non-disclosure agreements and other legal hurdles to clear, but, "sometimes it's imagined that once you get in, once you're there, you simply see stuff and it all makes sense to you". Instead, Seaver found office environments and people staring at computer terminals. "There's no there, there!" he says ruefully. "There's only more insides."

Solving this problem required practical and methodological innovations. Drawing on studies of other secretive groups, such as magicians and freemasons, certainly helped. However, when the storied anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote of ethnography as "deep hanging out", it's not clear whether he could have imagined Seaver dangling from the wall of a San Francisco climbing gym alongside one of his informants.

At MIT, Seaver previously wrote a history of the player piano, which could record performances and play them back. "There were similar issues there," he notes, "around automation and music being understood as being a domain which is so much about feelings and human expression, and yet one which is so technical."

While instruments, recording devices, and amplification systems are all technologies, they are deeply bound up in musical expressions which we think of as being profoundly human. So a robotic piano player provided a tantalising case study to raise "fun questions" about where the boundary lies between human and machine.

"The player piano becomes this classic figure of the badness of machinery in human life," Seaver explains. "If you ask people to imagine what a player piano sounds like in their heads, people always imagine that it's somewhat out of tune."

In fact, the modern player piano and the phonograph were invented within a couple of years of each other. "We have this idea in our minds that the player piano must have been the old technology, which was replaced by the phonograph, but there was a time when the player piano was seen as legit, and the phonograph seemed like a gimmick or a toy."

Music recommender systems, for Seaver, similarly combine questions of music and automation in the present day: "We're coming off a hundred plus years of life with audio recording that sounds a certain way, a feeling of how it makes sense to encounter certain media, which we've come to take for granted. Yet when you think about, for example, how a music recommender does what it does...what does it recommend? It doesn't recommend music in the abstract – there is no such thing: it recommends recordings. It only makes sense in a world where recordings dominate."

In an age of AI-produced visual art, the balance between robots and recordings might yet shift again. "The player piano involves remaking music from an existing order, not merely capturing the audio."

Certainly audiences like to hear recordings from familiar artists, and record labels are reluctant to grant rights for people to rework their material; yet one could imagine a world where there is the opportunity "to hack music up, remix it, and so on as well as the simple right to replay; you could imagine a version of Spotify that's full of options to remix and transform music. The reason we don't have that is not so much technical as corporate-legal."

Nick Seaver's *Computing Taste* is published by University of Chicago Press in December. IP

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