Recording Technology and Music

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Introduction

Music is an important performing art in human civilization. Since the first ‘clever man’ who shouted in varying his pitch; and the other ‘smart man’ who hit the stone by a stick to produce rhythmic pattern… music was invented, human being find a new way to express their passion.

Yes, I used the word ‘invent’; music is an invention by human being. Try to imagine you heard a sound of music when you walking in a tropical rain forest, you must not think it is ‘natural’ to hear such thing, the only implication of the sound of music is there are other human being *made* it.

Music is artificial, so technology must be involved when we make music. People make music by ‘instrument’, and we make instrument by technology. People may argue that vocal music is more ‘natural’, but we must not forget that “we don’t talk as we sing, we don’t sing as we talk” (I heard it more then 100 times in the choral master class from the conductor). It is legitimate to say that music and technology has a deep relation between them.

In this essay, I will discuss how technology influences music, and I will focus on recording technology and the performing practice(or the way of music making). Although most of the examples are taken from classical music, those points I mentioned can also imply on pop music, and readers can think of their own pop music examples themselves.

Duet for Recording Technology and Music

The Born of Recording Technology

Recording technology is firstly invented by the outstanding inventor Thomas Edison in the form called cylindrical phonographs, which is very space consuming and with short capacity. And later Emil Berliner's gramophone which used plate disc, and it really started the recording era of music. The popular of gramophone rose up the curtain of the duo recital of recording technology and music.

Music is firework

Music is an art of time, as the other genres of performing arts like drama and dance. A piece of music is keep flowing, and have duration, since it is started, it is toward to the end. On one hand musicians making music but on the other hand the music is losing itself. People enjoy music is to attain the enjoyment from the particular time. If you fall asleep during the last cadence of Beethoven's Symphony No.9, sorry, what I can tell you is you missed that amazing moment already (of course you can keep applauding for what you missed). Music is not like a picture, you can just keep looking at every inches of a picture, and it is hard to miss anything. If you didn't discover the *Mona Lisa* don't have eye bow, you look at it later is still the same, since the drawing won't change, it is freezed, in contrast with the flowing music.

Sound recording technology (and later the video recording technology) brought a new life to music. It changed the nature of music. The characteristic of 'one-time' is gradually

disappeared. Recording technology, as Theodore Adorno said, bring the "disparagement of all distances" (Adorno, 1989, p.28) to music. The two obvious distances are the actual distance of musicians and audience, and the time distance of the music is being performed and the time of audience to listen it.

The break down of 'here' and 'there'

Use the example of my idol, conductor Leonard Bernstein's unforgettable concert: the Beethoven Symphony No.9 concert for celebrating the destruction of Berlin Wall in 1989. Thank the recording technology, I can listen (and watch!) the concert at my home in Hong Kong on 25 November 2001, although the concert was held at Berlin in 25 December 1989. And the most important point is, I can play it whenever I like, and I can select which part of the concert to play as I like. If I'm too tired that I fall asleep and I can only listen the applauding when I woke up, it's ok, I press the button of rewind then I can traced back what I missed.

Music is sculpture

Music was firework, since it started, it toward the end. But now, music is sculpture, you can listen in what way you like, you can focus on which part you like. To audience, recording technology bring us a chance to taste a piece of music, or strictly speaking, a particular performance, in a more high-fidelity way, not just focus on the acoustic effect, also the 'music' itself, by the recording we can know the music more detail by keep playing and

playing it.

How about the musicians? If music become sculpture, then musicians are sculptors. Surely they became sculptors in the recording era. Canadian pianist Glenn Gould never launch live recital in concert hall since 1964 (when he was 32 only), and he only keep making recording until his early death in 1982. In his famous manifesto *The Prospects of Recording* (1966), he claimed that playing music in front of audience is not the best way to perform music but only tapped it in the recording studio. Only the studio can help him to show his ultimate interpretation of a piece of music: he can't stop the music suddenly and apologize to the audience that, "I just got a new idea on interpreting this piece, may I start again?" in a live concert. But he can do that to the recording producer. Also, the musicians, and, the engineers can make use of the technology to make the music perfect in the recording as they want, such as by combining fragments from different takes of recording sessions, or fixed the wrong notes by computer, or changed the balance and volume by the mixer.

Recording also enhanced the method of music making. Because of the multi-tracks recording system, one people can play solo and accompaniment together (e.g. the violinist Arthur Grumiaux also played the piano accompaniment in his recording of Beethoven Violin Sonata in 1950's), or one people play duo (e.g. the pianist Fazil Say played both 1st and 2nd piano in his recent recording of the two piano version of Stravinsky's *La Sacre du Printemps*). Such kind of 'performance' can only be made under the help of technology. Also, the two

musicians of a duo also can be recorded in two different places. Again, recording technology makes a “disparagement of all distances”, this time is for the musicians.

Coda

The most important impact on music by the recording technology is that music became a product in the cultural industry since the mass production and wide spread of music recording. And it seeds pop music. However since my focus is how recording technology influence the concept of music making, so I won’t elaborate the pointed at the above in this essay.

Conclusion: What's next after recording technology?

Recording technology is one of the greatest inventions in last millennium, it changed our attitude to music, and changed music itself.

Not only the performing practice, the composing method is also influenced. Many avant-garde composers tried to use pre-recorded materials in their composition, such as live performers play with a tape, or their music can only have a recorded version and impossible to be played in live. Such as Pierre Schaeffer's *concrete music* concept which invented in 1948: composed music for tape/LP ---- music is performed by the recording(s), recording is a kind of performance but not a storage of a performance. The boundary of recording/music is getting blurred.

Of course, the most important is the boundary of musicians and audience was blurred. When an audience listening an album of a musician, he is both 'here and there': he is at home listening the recording (here), but what he listening is happened in the concert hall sometimes before (there). Recording technology brought us a new spatial concept.

As I stated in the introduction, technology and music have a deep relation. I showed how recording technology influence music in this essay. Actually if I broaden the topic to "how technology influence music" then a huge number of issues I have to mentioned. For example, MTV and pop music, the use of fractals theory on composing music, electronic music, the interactive music performance in the cyberspace (e.g. Ryuichi Sakamoto's New York Live in

1998/, BBC Radio 3 “Virtual Gamelan Concert” for computer users). We can see how technology is deeply related to music. And we can expect, the information technology is the next wave of technology which influence music, as recording technology did 100 years ago.

Nowadays, people only focus on how information technology helps the music exchange privately and treat computer file as a new form of recording storage method. However, from the two cyber-performances of Ryuichi Sakamoto: *Discord* live in New York 1998 and the opera *Live* live in Osaka/New York/Frankfurt (the different parts of the opera was performed in three different location and combined in internet to form a complete opera). We can see how information technology can make a new influence on music in the 21st century. I am sure that information technology can make more deep impact on the form of music compositions and performing.

The blurred boundaries will be blurred more serious. Even distances will still exists, but can people still feel it exist in the future?

Reference

Adorno, T. (1989) *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Continuum.

Gould, G. (1966, April) 'The Prospect of Recording', *High Fidelity Magazine*, pp.46-63.