The Sound of Streamed Music

…the majority of consumers seem to be unaware of this, or of the audio quality they’re missing out on! They spend endless hours experiencing audio at sub-128kbps bit rates, at the mercy of whoever uploaded the material, without knowing what it should sound like, without realising how bad it sounds, and unaware of the artefacts they’re hearing that shouldn’t be there.

The quote stems from a journalist writing in the music recording magazine of Sound on Sounds and highlights issues concerning on-line music and the affordance such music brings for the listeners. Currently, music may be accessed via real-time streaming, accessed in complex conglomerates side by side with other types of content via computers, mobile phones, tablets, televisions, car stereos and soon to be accessed via new technology housed by the Internet of Things (IoT). Up until now, the technology of streaming has focused on access, robustness, interoperability between devices and extensive additional service augmenting the realm of musicking. Issues of the musical sound qualities and how aspects of sound quality interplay with the affordance of listening have more or less been neglected in favour of accessibility. From what we have learned from scholars accounting for digital formats and bit reduction as well as compression of dynamics in sound, there are some aspects concerning this field that is missing and as it seems neglected for the masses of music consumption.

The development of smart technology orbiting music has just recently returned to issues of high fidelity and home stereo equipment. This development could be interpreted as a renaissance for the affordance of music listening. However, the quality of sound, which embeds the music, is not solely depending on the recording, the mix or the mastering engineers. It also depends on the adaptation of sound streams for the final playback device. In addition to these traditional delimiting nodes of sound quality, streamed music is constituted by numerous things and aspects such as broadband access, broadband capability, the robustness of the broadband system, the digital format and the velocity of transmission.

This presentation, which is a part of a larger research project focusing the streaming company of Spotify as an actor of musical Bildung, will outline a suggestion for a designed method where different categories of participators will be selected to research the affordance of sound qualities of streamed music. Affordance of listening should be understood as the nexus between sound engineering and music cognition bridged by music education. The research should focus traditional aspects of perception and cognition but also socialisation that constitutes taste and preferences, and finally educational aspects as conceptualisation, learning and awareness. Four main themes are emphasised in this presentation; (i) developing methods to describe and measure sensation quantities when it comes to describing sound quality and the affordance of perceptual coding, (ii) selecting various types of listeners regarding age, gender, music educational background when studying stimulus quantities of streamed music, (iii) using the listeners preferred music to complement music from a control sample of tunes, and (iv) attributes used to communicate quality of sound and music within various communities.
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