

La musica nell'era digitale

by Tiziano Bonini and Paolo Magaudda (2023) Bologna, Il Mulino, 216 pp.

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La musica nell'era digitale is a comprehensive and insightful text that may be read and appreciated by both scholars and amateurs, who, for different but intertwined reasons, seek both an informed and non-simplistic perspective on the fruition of platformed music. For instance, some passages in Bonini and Magaudda's book made me think about the relationship I have with music platforms. Sometimes, for example, I can only write if I have Spotify's "Rainforest Sounds" playlist playing in the background. While reading this book, I also found myself reflecting on the constant intertwining of music and my life. I remembered how, as a small-town girl, I used to call the local radio station Studio 93 in Alfonsine, a small rural municipality north of Ravenna, to ask for dedications read by Andrea Pezzi, then a teenage deejay and my music gatekeeper. Or how I traded Barbie's lift house for Madonna's *True Blue* compact disc (which cost at least ten times less!) and then listened to "Open Your Heart" on loop for days on end. Fast-forwarding to today, my Spotify Wrapped 2024 confirms that I have not lost the tendency to repeated (compulsive) listening. At the same time, *La musica nell'era digitale* triggered also less pleasant memories, like when I brought Luca Carboni's third album to school at the request of the music teacher. In less than two days, the compact disc disappeared from the classroom, and the teacher did not offer to buy it back. A bad, almost traumatic experience, which I would have spared myself in the digital age.

The two authors have written a fluent and enticing text, unearthing how the platforms behind music production, distribution and listening work, how this intertwines with the cultural value of music today and how everyone can play a part in creating a music ecosystem that benefits everyone. It is based on a reasoned and solid discussion bringing together perspectives from science and technology studies and media studies. It is also accompanied by examples that will stick in the mind of the reader. For these reasons, it is that kind of book that will be appreciated both by students who are eager to discover how music consumption is studied and by those readers that are more familiar with the topic of agency in the fruition choices of cultural products, complementary to other analyses, such as that offered for example by Nowak and Bennett (2022).

Bonini and Magaudda make various connections with those cultural studies that shed light on the complex links between the functioning and development of platforms and the circulation of culture. For example, in the Introduction they question the dualism between attentive (foreground) and inattentive (background) listening, and thus the opposition between

authentic and functional musical experience. The development of analysis and argument throughout the book reveals the peculiar ways in which cultural aspects have been and are intertwined with economic and social elements. This reconstruction leads the authors to suggest that the future of music is not written in the functions of future technologies, but it will depend on how society will shape its progression in different directions.

Chapter 1 is an informed and detailed reconstruction of the innovation of digital music. This exploration is linked in a timely manner to reflections from the Sociology of Technology, for example, those on flexibility developed by Christina Dunbar-Hester (2014). The authors' aim is unravelling the intricate interconnections that seem to reproduce themselves in a similar way in different periods, from the nineteenth century onwards, when innovations that determined the evolution of music took hold. Among them are the advent of the phonograph, as media historian Lisa Gitelman (1999) has emphasized, and the introduction of the mp3 format, a topic of culture and technology scholar Jonathan Sterne's (2012) analysis. Other turning points have been the birth of peer-to-peer networks, the commercialisation of the iPod player, the creation of the iTunes platform, up to the emergence of Web 2.0, which gave rise to unprecedented forms of sharing. The chapter concludes by explaining the origins and early development of streaming in its various technical and practical meanings – that can be further explored in the research work of Eriksson et al. (2019), leading the reader to Chapter 2, which is devoted to the evolution of platforms and the interdependencies that music has with them. Through a clear and intertwined exploration of data and literature, the authors argue how the notion of digital platform has social implications. These can be observed at the micro level – characterised by the mechanisms of datafication, commodification and selection – at the meso level – defined by the platform ecosystems – and at the macro level – which leads to the question of the impact of this unprecedented form of social organisation on the cultural content sector in general and on music in particular. In relation to the latter, as Bonini and Magaudda point out, the monitoring of user behaviour is a peculiar aspect. This theme opens Chapter 3's in-depth discussion of how platforms select the music that reaches our ears. The authors offer a reconstruction of the mechanisms that characterize music platforms and an analysis that focuses on the transformations of gatekeepers – from peer-to-peer to platform – through a process of disintermediation of consumption and audiences. The authors detail research and data on algorithmic recommendations, playlists and music curators, and conclude that platforms are creating new inequalities between artists. In Chapter 4, different perspectives on the practice of listening to music are presented, enriched with references and empirical material from a previous study by the authors on digital practices. Overall, their analyses illustrate that the experience of listening to music is an ambivalent process. On the one hand, it consists of deliberate acts of domestication of algorithmic recommendations in order to link them to one's own rhythms and tastes. On the other hand, it also consists of forms of resistance to the invasiveness of data collection and the power to direct musical consumption choices.

In the fifth and final chapter, Bonini and Magaudda propose some scenarios about the role that artificial intelligence could play in the creation and dissemination of music. They do frame this exercise as an STS one, as they invite us to think about the relation between human activities and technological tools, particularly in music composition, as an intricate entanglement rather than a confrontation between two separate worlds. The authors focus on some of the

recent innovations brought about by artificial intelligence in the three main stages of the life of music: composition, production and distribution. They accompany their analysis with an accurate and detailed reconstruction that is accessible even to those readers that are less familiar with some emerging digital practices in the domain of music creation. For instance, they discuss the Landr platform, that offers an audio mastering service without human intervention at a very modest cost. Another example they unpack is the use of non-fungible tokens as certificates of ownership of a digital asset that makes it possible to create unique, rare or limited-edition musical objects that can become collectors' items, as the first editions of vinyl records were in the past. The authors leave their readers with a useful Epilogue, posing two interesting questions about the economic, relational and symbolic value of music and its potential to offer and create identification. Reflecting on these aspects, Bonini and Magaudo conclude their socio-historical reconstruction of the intersections between music production and fruition and developments in related technology and scholarly analysis by stating that the major changes in the circulation of music in society are not due to digital platforms and their technical characteristics *per se*. Rather, they are to be retraced in the reciprocal modelling between the nodes of the musical landscape network. These nodes are made up of actors, processes, ideas and objects.

In ideal dialogue with other rich reflections on the study – and rethinking – of music through Science and Technology Studies, as for example Hennion and Levaux (2019) and Tófalvy and Barna (2020), the text makes a solid contribution to the strand of analysis of the relationship between musical cultures, taste, constructions of authenticity, and technology – while drawing attention to the limits within which this lens helps to deepen knowledge. I believe that this work is also a starting point for new scenarios of future research into how we, as listeners, consumers and citizens, will be able to creatively appropriate the tools – in the broadest sense – that will be available to us, defining a destiny for music that is by no means yet written. As already mentioned, the book could be a useful tool for students, although the inclusion of boxes with illustrative cases, examples, or reflective prompts might have provided additional support for reading and comprehension.

References

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