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A textbook social history of musical media technology

Review of **Sounds, screens, speakers: an introduction to music and media**, by Charles Fairchild, New York and London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 400 pp., £88.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-50133-624-9, £23.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-50133-623-2

Charles Fairchild's textbook *Sounds, Screens, Speakers* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of work examining the intersection of music, media, and technology. It is a propaedeutic text designed explicitly for pedagogical use and could be used to supplement university-level courses across a range of related disciplines spanning the humanities and social sciences. It may also be useful to established researchers whose interests in media and communications studies do not come into direct contact with music and sound, or to those from more distant disciplines who require an introduction to musical media history, though its didactic tone as an instructive text may impede certain readers.

The book's structure is logical and approachable. It follows a loose chronology from 1875 to 2015, divided into four main sections. Topics covered comprise the early recording industry and its technologies (1875–1940); the musical film and radio industries, together with the central role of the recording studio in music production (1930–1970); television, the popular music video, and feature-length documentary film-making following celebrity performers and groups (1960–2000); and the enormous impact of the MP3 codec on the global music industry, including digital piracy networks and their eventual subsumption into streaming services, as well as the impact of reality television series on the construction of twenty-first-century pop star iconography (1980–2015). As such, *Sounds, Screens, Speakers* constitutes an ambitious and wide-ranging account of musical mediation and its cultural objects from the advent of the gramophone to the present day.

Each of the book's broader sections contains four complementary chapters which provide snapshots of notable cultural phenomena in varying degrees of detail. The sources consulted are regularly reproduced in part or in full for the reader's benefit, ranging from period advertising and publicity photographs to film screenshots and contemporary criticism. Examples are consistently engaging and informative, and the writer's analysis insightful. Moreover, the writing is often loaded with advice for students learning to approach both primary and secondary source materials. For example, each of the "key readings" that punctuate the book as heuristic examples of relevant scholarship is prefaced with a partial analysis of the text, designed to guide the reader and encourage critical thought.

At several points during the course of the work, I was reminded of Paul du Gay and colleagues' influential textbook *Doing Cultural Studies* (1997) for its regular signposting and profusion of informative prefatory matter. That said, Fairchild is far less concerned than his predecessors with the description of relevant concepts and theories surrounding the subject, opting instead for specific historical analysis at every turn. Perhaps the writer believes theory would unnecessarily complicate the work of his own textbook, or that musical media studies as a discipline is most productive when favouring with source-based historical methodologies and does not stand to benefit significantly from theoretical considerations. While I would not claim that such authorial decisions weaken the book, there is surely a case to be made for the importance of introducing students to media theory in tandem with data analysis on the basis that theoretical work has been vital to the development of media studies and its related disciplines since its inception.

Where theory lacks, social commentary abounds. A diverse range of relevant social issues are addressed throughout the book. This resonates with Fairchild's opening claims that media "create social relationships" and that "all media are social media, always" (1), statements that he evidences extensively with rich examples. For instance, there are a handful of historical cases pertaining to racial issues that surface throughout the book, including consideration of the central role played by African-American jazz in the genesis of the early music industry that foregrounds the baleful racism and social backlash faced by its performers (90–95), as well as direct engagement with the mediating role of the gramophone in the formation of what Paul Gilroy (1993) has termed "the Black Atlantic", during which Fairchild briefly traces the geographical displacement of such early technologies to the coasts of former West African colonies and back again to the Caribbean islands and the North American mainland (109–124). In each case, the writer's account is illustrated with case studies and musical examples, all of which are included to encourage the reader to engage deeply with the fabric of music's extensive mediations and their social realities.

There may be some readers who regard the didacticism of Fairchild's writing as inhibiting the flow of the text. While certain allowances should be made given that the book's target audience consists predominantly of those with less experience in negotiating a large-scale academic text, its occasionally patronising tone may jar with even the most uninitiated of readers. The writer is clearly well-meaning in his more instructive passages, but certain remarks may have better gone unsaid to avoid the sense of writer talking down to reader, as with the inclusion of statements such as "Wikipedia is never, ever enough" (238), or the decision to define the word "references" as "the sources used to write this book" (3). That said, such instances are broadly uncommon, and many

student readers will benefit from the clear direction afforded by the book's overall structure, pace, and style.

Moreover, for scholars working within sound studies, further criticisms may arise regarding Fairchild's decision not to engage with the insights of some of the discipline's key proponents. For example, within a chapter on the social anxieties surrounding the sonic fidelity of early mediated music, seasoned readers will surely welcome Fairchild's designation of Emily Thompson's (1995) foundational paper on the marketing of the Edison gramophone as a "very important article" to read (69) but may in turn, as I did, miss Jonathan Sterne's extensive and equally germinal account of the socially contingent "discourse of fidelity" in *The Audible Past* (2003, 215–286), especially given a number of similarities between their arguments and approaches. The same might be said for the lack of attention to Michael Bull's (2000, 2007) agenda-setting work in the chapter dedicated to personal stereo technologies (333–344), or for the general absence of important developments within the sociology and social anthropology of music to the Frankfurt School's theories of musical mediation in work by scholars such as Tia DeNora (2003) and Georgina Born (2005). Of course, for a textbook with such an ambitious scope, there will necessarily be some requirements for truncation, not least given the multiply complex task of providing an appropriate balance of content to immerse inexperienced readers within a subject without inundating them. I do not wish to suggest that Fairchild's work is lesser for its omission of certain important figures within the discourse, but instead that I wonder what led the writer to deem such accounts unimportant enough to exclude from a text designed for students just beginning their exploration of the subject area. Therefore, while I consider such lacunae worthy of interrogation, I am sympathetic to the fact that Fairchild's account cannot encompass every facet of each relevant field. However, as a result, the book may not suit those who wish to foreground the important contributions of the sound studies literature in discussions of musical media.

Nonetheless, many educators tasked with designing university modules on music and media may find that the book offers a varied and engaging structural trajectory for their courses. I can envisage the work's successful interlacing of the chronological and the thematic providing a useful backbone for a week-by-week syllabus into which course leaders may choose to interpolate further materials. Given its affordable price as a textbook, its rigorous yet accessible presentation of original research contributions, and its insightful and instructive engagement with existing publications, Sounds, Screens, Speakers would feature as a worthy addition to the bookshelves of students and educators alike.

Funding

Notes on contributor

Jacob Kingsbury Downs is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield. His project, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, considers headphone listening through a (post)phenomenological lens, with emphasis on individuals' experiences of embodied space, mediated social relations, and the materiality of technology.

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