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## Competing Sounds? Podcasting and Popular Music

### Abstract

Podcasts and popular music are different kinds of sonic media, but they are increasingly in direct competition for our listening time within the ‘audio market’. This is notable in part because podcasting studies has generally been positioned as an extension of radio studies, and overlap between this work and popular music studies has to date been minimal. This introduction to a special issue on popular music and podcasts highlights that framing music and podcasts as ‘competing sounds’ permits new contributions to numerous important areas of media study, including platformization, creative labor, media representation, and the role of sonic media in everyday life.

**Keywords:** popular music, podcasts, platformization, music industries, creative labor, Spotify, cultural production, listening

### Introduction

‘Music and podcasts are competing for the same time’: this was the key take-away from a May 2021 report on podcast audiences compiled by the respected media analysis firm MiDIA (Mulligan 2021). One of the report’s striking statistical headlines is that ‘more than a quarter [of music streaming users] are listening to less music directly because of podcasts’ (ibid). Increasingly, then, as a broad set of actors fight for a limited amount of audiences’ time, industry figures are speaking not in terms of music markets and podcast markets, but of ‘the audio market’ as a whole. This terminological convergence reflects the substantial efforts by digital streaming platforms (DSPs) to integrate music and podcasts (as well as, in some cases, audiobooks and social media platforms based on audio, like Clubhouse) as part of the same service. Platforms, most notably Spotify, but also Amazon, Apple and Google are offering users new ways to view music and podcasts in the same interface and, increasingly, in the same listening session. But despite terminological and technical convergence, scholars have been slow to apply this ‘audio market’ framing in their research on either music or podcasts. The nascent field of podcast studies, with strong roots in radio studies, has positioned podcasts as a more personalized, mobile, and democratic form of audio distribution that opens audio up to new voices and new techniques for communicating through sound (Spinelli and Dann 2019). Popular music studies, on the other hand, has focused on digital audio’s current plight in the era of streaming services and digital platforms. Each field has tried to address the utopian excitement around the possibilities of digital disruption, as well as the moral panics about how new services are threatening old practices of creativity and cultural production as Spotify and other big tech actors increasingly come to mediate the distribution of cultural goods like music and podcasting (Hesmondhalgh 2021).

The music–podcasts convergence is not brand new – Spotify began testing podcasts as early as November 2014 – but it is during the second ‘golden age’ of podcasting (Bonini 2015; Berry, 2015) that music and podcasting have come in more direct competition. In May 2019, music industries journalist Tim Ingham described podcasts’ audience growth as ‘eating into the bread and butter of record labels’ (2019), citing Edison Research’s *Share of Ear* study which showed a 5% decrease in music’s market share, versus a 20% increase for spoken audio. Another report from 2021 suggests that music listening was down 8% since 2014 thanks to the competing influence of podcasts and spoken word audio (Smith 2021).

Spotify has led on the integration of music and podcasts, acquiring notable podcast production firms (Gimlet, Parcast, The Ringer) as well as big-name hosts (Joe Rogan, Joe Budden, The Obamas), and tying them to exclusive distribution deals. But they have not been alone: Amazon Music added podcasts in September 2020 in key markets (Dredge 2020) and bought podcast production company Wondery in December 2020 (which in turn has been partnering closely with Universal Music Group). Sony Music Entertainment purchased UK podcast producer Somethin’ Else in February 2020, and Warner Music Group and Spotify co-signed an ‘innovative podcast development deal’ in April 2021. In China the situation is slightly different – podcasts do not have the same cultural penetration – but there is certainly a growing interest in ‘audio content’. Tencent, which holds 66% of the Chinese music streaming market (and has mutual equity with Spotify), owns substantial shares in Ximalaya – a provider of podcasts, audio books, and audio educational material, loosely equivalent to Audible in the US and UK market, but with a greater emphasis on user-generated content (see Xu and Morris 2021). In India, the market-leading music DSP Gaana has invested heavily in podcasting under the ‘Gaana Originals’ banner (Forde 2019); the next-largest DSP, JioSaavn, offers an all-in-one YourCast distribution service for regional podcast producers. The Spanish language podcast market is perhaps the fastest-growing (Cramer-Flood 2021), and the concurrent global success of Latin American music has permitted numerous intersections of music and podcasting (Gallego, this issue).

Academic literature on the intersection of music and podcasts is sparse. A flurry of literature published during podcasting’s ‘first wave’ addresses some of the complexities around licensing copyrighted music in this novel format and speaks primarily to law and policy concerns (Aitken 2005; Barrett 2006; Carter and Lunt 2006). Markman (2015), in a broad reflection on ‘a decade in the life’ of podcasting, briefly notes the relationship between music and podcasts, asking whether music podcasting might be ‘limited to big players with deep pockets’ (2015: 242), and highlighting music and podcasting as a potentially fruitful area for future research. Two further articles from this same issue of *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* investigate music and podcasting: Cwynar (2015) focusses on CBC Radio 3’s successful transition to podcasting, arguing that the station’s public media status and long-standing ideological commitment to independent music allowed it to avoid usual problems of music licensing; Fauteux (2015) illustrates how music podcasting intersected with MP3 blogs during that period, freeform efforts at music archiving. Morris (forthcoming, 2022) looks at the history of podcasts featuring music and argues that the industrial tensions around podcasts as a form of music promotion and distribution shaped the kinds of music podcasts that emerged and limited the abilities of both podcasters and musicians to share their work in the process.

In terms of empirical research that directly addresses this special issue’s titular question – are podcasts and music ‘competing sounds’? – relatively little has been published to date. Lars Nyre (2015)

provided London-based research participants with listening materials in order to assess the ‘situational fit’ of music, radio, and podcasting for ‘urban headphone listening’. The results indicate a tendency for music to give an empowering ‘streetwise’ feeling, for radio to provide a (not always pleasant) sense of ‘liveness’, and for podcasts to be too information-driven to suit mobile listening. However, these findings are shaped substantially by the study’s specific choice of ‘test’ podcast (the BBC’s *In Our Time* – itself an edited radio broadcast), which participants found too dense and information-packed to suit mobile listening. In another study, a team of researchers from Spotify (2019) analyzed Spotify listener data to conclude that ‘podcast and music consumption compete slightly but do not replace one another’, since users ‘open another time window to listen to podcasts’. These claims, however, are limited by their Spotify-centric framing, and by how Spotify classifies ‘podcast adopters’ vs. other kinds of listeners.

Our aim with this issue is not to definitively answer the ‘competition’ question, so much as to identify fruitful lines of inquiry arising from putting podcasting and popular music in closer conversation. In working across disciplinary boundaries to do so, we believe there are opportunities to contribute fresh perspectives on some of the most pressing research agendas within music and media studies, including platformization and algorithmic culture, creative labor and (under)payment, media representation and social justice, and the impact and meaning of sonic media and audio experiences in everyday life.

### **Putting Podcasting and Music in Conversation**

First, both popular music studies and podcasting research provide helpful lenses to understand the larger concept of **platformization**. Platforms like Spotify, YouTube, Apple, etc. create multi-sided markets that put into contact a number of different actors, including producers, consumers, advertisers, distributors and cultural content itself like music, or podcasts (Poell, Nieborg, Duffy 2021). Platforms currently play a central role in the distribution, discovery and experience of culture, and the features, services and terms they provide exert significant influence over the circulation of cultural goods. For music, the ‘platformization of cultural production’ (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4281) has been a central part of the music industry’s strategy to recover from losses incurred by the file-sharing services introduced at the turn of the century. Platformization has pushed music from a business that relied on digital downloads and the sale of individual commodities to a service where vast catalogues are available to access for a monthly fee or in exchange for data and advertising. While podcasts emerged via relatively open RSS feeds and an ethos that aligned it more closely to amateur blogging than with professionally-produced mainstream radio (Bottomley 2020), the ‘second age’ of podcasting has seen those same music platforms centralize podcast distribution, discovery and consumption (Bonini 2015). Though Apple Music (formerly iTunes) was arguably always a “platform” with interests in both music and podcasting, it’s relatively hands-off approach to podcasting meant that podcasts could circulate on the platform, as well as in a variety of other spaces, platforms, and apps (Morris 2020). Increasingly though, podcasting’s open architecture is being challenged and pushed towards the ‘walled garden’ models of platform-exclusive distribution (Sullivan 2019).

Shared interests in the dynamics of platformization might help researchers studying podcasts or music, since they each offer different but relevant lessons. While digital streaming platforms host both

music creators and podcast creators, initial evidence suggests that platforms do not feel obliged to offer these two groups equivalent levels of access and autonomy. Spotify, for example, has stated that it 'will give podcasters [their] subscribers' contact details' (Dredge 2021) – a move that would seem to go against the mediating, data-collecting impetus of platform economics (Zuboff 2019), and which it accordingly seems unlikely to extend to musicians. Similarly, Apple Music and Spotify have been more willing to allow podcasters to explore different avenues for generating revenue (i.e. premium subscriptions, paywalls, etc.), whereas music artists on Spotify are more limited in their options. Pertinently, Spotify's own research indicates that listeners trust advertising embedded in podcasts to a greater extent than other kinds of advertising (Magna 2021).

Focusing on podcasting and music together also sheds light on the influence platforms have over **changing conditions of labor and payment for creative workers**. In this area, podcasting provides important context for discussions of musical work and its (dwindling?) rewards. In May 2020, responding to the news that Spotify announced their \$100m deal to secure an exclusive license for the world's most popular podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, music writer Ted Gioia tweeted:

A musician would need to generate 23 billion streams on Spotify to earn what they're paying Joe Rogan for his podcast rights [...]. In other words, Spotify values Rogan more than any musician in the history of the world. Sound fair to you? (Gioia, 2020)

An even starker presentation of this podcast-usurping-music thesis is offered in a 2019 article by Chris Richards, popular music critic for the Washington Post, headlined: 'Are podcasts killing music or just wasting our time?' (2019). Such fears are likely not allayed by research that identifies Spotify as having connections to advertising and finance that may outweigh its commitment to music (Vonderau 2019). But to pit music against podcasts in this broad payment dispute is to discount the possibility of analytical and structural parallels – as well as opportunities for solidarity across creative industries. Recent music-oriented efforts to organize sector-wide against Spotify have largely been treated as separate from developments in other fields, such as three of Spotify's largest podcast acquisitions – Gimlet, Parcast, and The Ringer – unionizing with the Writers Guild of America, East (WGAE). More broadly, there is a need to contextualize both musical and podcasting labor with aspects of the value chain they share, unsustainable and unethical production of ICT hardware and consumer electronics (Devine 2019), and the kinds of 'ghost work' that underpin the not-so-automated activity of digital platforms (Gray and Suri 2019).

Music and podcasts also have distinctive connections to notions of **access and demotic media production**, as well as to related issues of **identity and political voice**. Podcasting emerged as a grassroots, home-recording medium – a history that might be valuably explored through comparing and contrasting with longer histories of 'DIY' or independent music production. Accounts of independent music's platformisation show that ethics of cooperation and community may not be easily compatible with the winner-takes-all dynamic of streaming economies (Jones 2021). Podcaster Joe Budden seemed to reflect on similar dynamics when leaving his exclusive Spotify deal: 'there's an entire [podcasting] ecosystem here that you have to respect [...]. Everybody's not looking to feed the soil – some are just looking to take the fruit' (Carman 2020). Spotify's purchase of Anchor, a user-friendly, 'all-in-one' platform for podcast creation and publishing, suggests that the future of podcasting may echo the

‘interdependence’ we see today in small-scale music; that is, independent creators increasingly beholden to the affordances of toolsets offered by monopolistic platforms.

The ‘indie’ or ‘DIY’ ethics of early podcasting and some music genres are imbricated in comparable but distinct histories of white male chauvinism (for indie music, see Bannister 2006; for podcasting, see Markman 2012 and Florini 2015), expressed both in terms of numerical predominance and prejudicial structures of reward and recognition. In the contemporary environment of digital consumption, such inequities are exacerbated by biased algorithmic recommendation systems (Noble 2018), as well as longer-standing inequalities within the cultural industries. Recent work on the foundation of National Public Radio – an important ideological lodestar and talent-pool for US podcasting (Cwynar 2019) – shows the impact of a ‘white habitus’ on the organizational culture and media output of an institution that believed itself to be a ‘blank slate’ (Garbes 2022).

Podcasting does retain a capacity to constitute ‘alternative media’ – as Florini highlights when she notes the capacity for podcast networks to provide an ‘enclave’ for Black sociality (2015). Independent and grassroots music scenes, too, can function as ‘enclaves’, but it is often the case that innovative Black music styles are accommodated, adapted, and adopted by the commercial popular music industries. Indeed, the history of popular music shows a pattern of musical exploitation and appropriation from Black (and other) cultures by predominantly white producers, performers and audiences. This perhaps suggests that the symbolic content of music might have a greater capacity, compared to ‘talk’, to be divorced from its social, political, and economic context.

As we finalize this special issue in January 2022, the contestation of music, podcasts, and political voice is being freshly and dramatically concretised. Neil Young announced recently that he would remove his music from Spotify, in protest against the platform’s investment in podcaster Joe Rogan – and specifically, against Rogan’s vaccine-skepticism and COVID-19 misinformation. Young’s polemic framing in this instance – ‘They can have Rogan or Young. Not both.’ (Greene 2022) – highlights a challenge for Spotify that is specific to its ‘audio first’ strategy. Podcasting, by virtue of its talk-centric format, is inherently more connected than music to the fraught world of ‘misinformation’, and more broadly to the domain of media ethics. Music, while often politically charged, can be treated for corporate branding purposes as a humanizing and universalistic net positive. Even when music contains misinformation or falsehoods or is made by popular artists who support beliefs similar to Rogan’s, it rarely faces the same kind of criticism and public backlash currently facing Rogan. The default discursive position taken by major online platforms has been to emphasize their neutral, disinterested status as mere conduits of content (Gillespie 2017); though with platforms regularly acting as publishers not just conduits, such claims seem increasingly untenable. Spotify, by virtue of its role in producing and distributing non-musical content, may soon be held accountable across complex domains of cultural politics which would have been unlikely to arise had it remained concerned ‘simply’ with music.

Next, a holistic view of music and podcasts might also permit broader theorisation of the role of audio media in **the production of subjectivities**, especially through **datafication**. As a ‘secondary medium’, audio is often appropriate for accompanying other activities (Morris and Patterson 2015), and accordingly both music and podcasts are valuable, in a datafied age, for what they indicate about routines, behaviors and moods. For Eric Drott, this is a marked shift in music’s role in social reproduction: Spotify and others today seek to address listeners as ‘dividuals’ (following Deleuze’s concept where individuals are even further subdivided into component parts) who seek the right music

for every moment, rather than the right music for their music taste in perpetuity. Music's special power is in purportedly 'affording access to our innermost lives, to our hidden psychic depths, to an extent that other media cannot replicate' (Drott 2018: 261; see also Braun 2020). But it is notable that many of Spotify's mood-based playlists offer both music and podcasts. The invasion of smart speakers (and the broader Internet of Things) as well as Silicon Valley's interest in 'social audio' platforms such as Clubhouse that feature live chat rooms for public and private groups have also highlighted the value of non-musical audio data as grist for behavioral prediction. (Spotify's foray into live social audio spaces, Greenroom, was acquired and re-branded in mid-2021, but has far fewer users than Clubhouse). The value of podcasts and spoken word in Spotify's 'dividualising' efforts may relate to the fact that music information retrieval efforts seem imperfect to say the least (see Eriksson 2016). As Liz Pelly savvily notes, though, Spotify's overall claims of 'artificial intelligence' may be exaggerated bluster intended to dazzle institutional investors (2020).

Lastly, there is much to be said about the interacting socio-cultural status of these audio formats, and **the functions of music and podcasts in people's lives**. Recorded music and podcasts are distinct formats, yet they occupy similarly 'everyday' roles: soundtracking commutes, chores, exercise, etc., and offer comparable forms of time management and/or mood regulation. Even if the evidence of direct competition between podcasts and popular music may be contested and contradictory (see above), the way we 'use' the two forms are often juxtaposed in order to say something about who we are and how we listen. Podcasts and music are used to bolster cultural archetypes. In particular, there is a sense that podcasts represent something of a 'safe option', offering routine and calming talk, compared to the sometimes bewildering landscape of music consumption. A scripted exchange in the Australian comedy-drama series *Sisters* captures this neatly. Lead character Isaac is on a first date with a woman who asks, off-screen, about his taste in music. We get his response: 'I did listen to music a fair bit in my twenties, before podcasts were invented. But now, um, mostly podcasts' ('Episode 6', 2018). The subsequent awkward silence indicates the insufficiency of this answer, and the probable failure of the date. Podcast listening here is used as short-hand to signify a distinct lack of *jouissance* – a sedentary, deflated subject with limited capacity to communicate back to the world

One popular TikTok video represents another, related aspect of this music–podcast juxtaposition, wherein user @magnolia\_thunder cuts abruptly from a depiction of 'Me in 1996' to a depiction of 'Me now'. In the former they are listening to The Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' while playing the colorful board game Mancala; in the latter they are blankly refilling a weekly pill organizer while listening to a true crime podcast, the fictional narrator of which intones, deadpan: 'her legs were cut off, her ears were cut off, her tongue was cut off [...]' (Brown 2021). Again, there seems to be an indication that podcasts soundtrack and personalize a particularly adult numbness – in which even graphic descriptions of violent crime have a soporific effect.

The 'resigned' podcast listener is not the only archetype, of course – we might also think of the hurried, business-oriented character for whom music is functionally useless. The CEO of India's largest podcast production platform HubHopper has pointedly argued that the benefit of podcasts is that they don't 'steal your time' (Khetarpal 2019). Podcasts get us up to speed, in a manner similar to some broadcast radio, but often inflected with a 'smartest guy in the room' edge; podcatching apps' quick-skip and double-speed functionalities support this construction of an 'efficient, productive [...] "power" listener' (Morris and Patterson 2015: 226). In China especially, podcasting seems to be closely tied to the

burgeoning 'self-improvement' market (Quah, 2019). The broader point is that podcast listening and music listening can signify different positions in relation to social and political life; they place us in different relations to what Nick Couldry calls 'the myth of the mediated centre' – the Durkheimian notion that, in modernity, it is the media who are the prime interpreters of society's supposed 'centre' (2011). So, while music and podcasts may be directly competing from the industry analysts' perspective, these formats also serve as repositories for distinct values – which placing music and podcasts in conversation may help to reveal.

## Article overviews

The articles in this special issue shed light on many of these themes, and develop new questions around music and podcast consumption, listening practices, the sociology of cultural production, and convergence within the cultural industries.

Simon Barber and Craig Hamilton collect, categorize, and analyze a corpus of Apple Music user reviews to ask: why do people listen to music podcasts? Their innovative machine-learning method makes an important contribution to a growing literature on motivations for podcast listening (Perks et al 2019; Chan-Olmsted and Wang 2020), and their focus on music podcasts brings a valuable specificity to the question of what podcasts 'afford' listeners. Amongst other things, we learn that through their specific structures and formats, music podcasts provide new insight into the making of notable musical works and fulfill a need for nostalgic engagement amongst listeners.

Music podcasts are the focus in two other articles in this issue. Amy Skjerseth argues that *Switched On Pop* specializes in a novel, 'ride-along musicology', achieved by paying a close analytical attention to audio moments that might not be feasible in other media. Skjerseth also shows how guest host Lizzo is able to stress the importance of genre and cultural tradition, thereby broadening the show's epistemological focus beyond 'the music itself'. Liz Giuffre looks at *Song Exploder* – probably the best-known music podcast – and shows that its archetypal podcast formatting makes it a valuable hermeneutic for higher education media pedagogy. *Song Exploder's* recent adaptation to a Netflix series also gives further scope to consider how the original podcast differs from that higher budget, audio-visual format. From these articles we gain a sense of what might make the music podcast distinct from music's convergence with other mediums. The podcasting imperative to get 'behind the story', coupled with a pedagogic impulse inherited from public radio and popular science, tends to result in a combination of fine-tooth analytical detail presented alongside under-explored origin stories.

Given our special issue's timing, it's perhaps not surprising that we received submissions that reflected on the altered soundscapes brought on by COVID-19, and the ways in which podcasting and music, as intensely personal media, helped foster community during times of isolation. Helen Wolfenden, Howard Sercombe, and Adrian Renzo's article was inspired by Helen's own cross-continental connection to the *Basement Traxx* radio show, and this weekly show's ability to create a virtual community that would have been impossible to recreate in-person. The article also usefully demonstrates that categories such as 'podcast', 'livestream', and 'radio' are continuing to be blurred by grassroots practitioners – as well as by the dependency of content formatting on the socio-technical features of digital platforms (Poell et al 2021). In Kate Galloway's study of *The World According to Sound's Outside In: A Communal Listening Series*, new community is generated around the attentive



listening practices made possible by the pandemic's enforced quieting of urban life. This study also highlights that podcasts, unlike say, a streaming playlist, can introduce and contextualize experimental sounds in order to create a sense of a shared 'journey', even amongst disparate listeners (what Brian Fauteux calls 'piloted listening').

Finally, concerns over music–podcast competition are contextualized by J. Ignacio Gallego's contribution, which offers the historical parallel of record companies' and radio stations' market overlaps in the early twentieth century. Gallego's article also develops a highly valuable taxonomy of music industries' podcasting efforts, from official artist histories to contemporary 'making of' documentary series.

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