Bytes and Backbeats
Savage, Steve

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part one Repurposing Presentation

Introduction to Part I

Part I examines the way that the presentation of recorded music has been altered by music production within the computerized environment of the DAW. I describe the implementation of a variety of these new capabilities in the postrecording process (work on the recording done after the actual recording is made). Through the description and analysis of an application study and a studio study I examine the meaning and impact of these technologies. Both studies examine the level of polish being employed in current popular music recordings. Use of these techniques has generated a reaction against excessive refining within a genre that has traditionally valued a certain rough and raw musical aesthetic. I explore the impact of the aesthetic judgments that have come into play since computer-based audio has opened the door to these levels of musical “fixing” and performance “cleansing,” noting some of the creative rewards along with the more frequently articulated shortcomings of these practices.

With the ability to correct both rhythm and pitch, current pop music recordings have acquired a new level of musical accuracy as defined in terms of metronomic timing and regulated intonation. The application study (chapter 1) describes the process of this musical “fixing” of one particular pop song. The elaborate procedure is detailed and sets up an examination of the way these manipulations have affected musical construction and collaboration. Notions of cultural value are weighed against this kind of manipulation of musical performance. This expanded process of mixing and manipulation of musical elements, these new paradigms of presenta-
tion, are considered within the context of more traditional musical activities such as composition and arranging.

I argue that despite the wholesale changes in production capabilities there is not a fundamental change in the relationship between technology and music making. Technological mediation has achieved new heights in regards to degree, but it is not changed in kind—technology has always mediated music creation and reception. Yet the new technologies that allow the relatively easy “fixing” of human performance and “humanizing” of electronically constructed performances challenge long-standing practices and prejudices. And it is in part because of revolutionary technologies that popular music enjoys a kind of creative renewal.

The studio study (chapter 2) explores other new elements of music construction generated by DAW-based technology. I examine the intersection of the technical part of the recording process with some of the sounds that singers make outside of the essential verbal elements that create the words they sing. I consider the significance of this interaction for the listener—what might be said about how the recording process affects the experience of these nonverbal sounds and in turn how this perception might affect the experience of the music. The analysis centers on an expanded understanding of Roland Barthes’s notion of the “grain” of the voice; I extend Barthes’s approach to music aesthetics to include the way aesthetics are now intertwined with technology. In doing so I also appeal to Barthes (in absentia, of course) to accept the “grain” of the voice that I find to be an inextricable part of the contemporary recording process.

Music recording has always and primarily been a particular presentation of original, live musical performances. As apparent from the application and studio studies here, it is the extent of access to and manipulation of all manner of source material that has been expanded in such dramatic fashion through the use of various tools in the digital audio domain. As a result, the process involved that generates the final musical recording is increasingly obscured. As some of these practices are examined in these studies, the new capabilities created by the technologies encounter traditional ideas about the writers and performers of music, and ultimately the way “their” music is presented. The blurring of roles, and in the process the breakdown of the dichotomy between art and artifice, is the inevitable outcome of this encounter.

In the final chapter of Part I, I look more generally into the theoretical sides of the correlation between music, recording, and the human experience. I begin by examining the debate regarding technological determin-
ism—the extent to which technology drives culture versus culture driving technology. This introduces further explorations of art, artifice, authenticity, and reciprocity and how they all figure into a necessary reconsideration of the place of recording in the contemporary music experience. The results illustrate the limiting nature of hierarchical judgments about how music is presented. There is no better indication of this than the fact that lower fidelity mp3s are preferred by many to CDs, and the history of audio technologies is riddled with similar examples—cassettes versus LPs, and so on. Many consumers have long preferred recorded music to live performance. Factors governing the presentation of music, its meaning, and its reception reflect constantly shifting historical and cultural conditions.