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Contemporary European History

Edited by
Corinna Unger and Matthias Middell

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A Handbook

Edited by
Klaus Nathaus and Martin Rempe

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Ulrik Volgsten

13 Extending the Sonic Bubble: Solitary Listening as a Technology of the Self

It is an extremely pleasant and varied occupation [...] You may think that it would set one's nerves on edge, all this noise from a gramophone from morning to evening. Dear me, you would be completely mistaken—this is no noise, this is music! There is one thing that you clearly did not consider: when you find yourself in a joyless mood and everything seems dark, then you just put on a jazz or foxtrot disc and set the machine going. Does anyone think, then, that one can be gloomy and boring! And, perchance, where the joy of life seems all but too much, one fine day, with the sun beaming down out over the highway, yes, *then* one can drive away with a sorrowful march. In such a way, one's mood regulates itself amongst the gramophones!

Indeed, wasn't she sitting there with the phones to her ears, deaf and absent to everything. [...] Then, just as he appears, she looks up, raises her hand to show she doesn't want to be disturbed, shouting that it is a wonderful organ concerto.

Two quotations set the stage for this chapter, both taken from Swedish weekly journals of the 1920s. The first, from an article in *Charme, Den moderna damtidningen* (The Modern Ladies' Journal), cites a young saleswoman in a gramophone store describing how gramophone playing can function as a practice of individual mood regulation. The second, from a short story in *Hemma: Tidning för hem och hushåll* (Home: Journal for Home and Household), describes a solitary listening situation in which a middle-aged woman in her living room listens to music with headphones and is apparently disturbed by her friend entering the room. The significance of these seemingly trivial episodes is that, although recording and playback technology was almost half a century old at the time, the two settings for listening to music were new. Until the 1920s, music listening had hardly, if at all, been available as a means for individual mood regulation, and listening neither to recorded music nor to any music at all had been available as a solitary practice. Music was, until the third decade of the twentieth century—and being strange as it may seem today when almost everybody listens to music with headphones both privately and in public spaces—commonly regarded as a communal rather than as an individual and solitary activity.

The quotes are also significant in that they both signaled a trenchant modernity in a cultural climate otherwise dominated by a conservative civilization critique. As the young saleswoman a bit naïvely enjoys entertainment novelties from the other side of the Atlantic, she describes the role that music would acquire in the decades to come as a mood regulator, especially its capacity to reinforce processes of individual and subcultural self-identification (the latter no-

tably exemplified in Sweden by the *swingpjatt* from the early 1940s). And as the slightly older woman uses headphones shielding her ears from her environment, she embraces modern technology in a way that may have seemed even more futuristic as it was deployed to listen to classical music.

What neither of the examples reveals is their relation to each other. Music listening as a practice for individual mood regulation and identity reinforcement—music as a self-technology—was carried out in, indeed required, shielded spaces that enabled solitary listening to music. And reciprocally, the attraction of solitary listening seems to a large extent to rest on its ability to facilitate music as self-technology. Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight ways that these two aspects of music listening benefited from each other and the role it had for the apprehension of music.

The chapter presents evidence from Sweden, by no means a leading nation in matters of phonograph and gramophone playing and listening but still hot on the heels of Germany, Great Britain, and the USA. The emergence of solitary listening and its use as a technology of the self largely depended on the availability of technological equipment and a certain living standard. Consequently, they may be regarded as features of twentieth-century consumer societies more generally, rather than specifically European in scope or nature.

The chapter devotes particular attention to the first half of the twentieth century. This is not only because this period has attracted less scholarly attention, neither for Sweden nor for anywhere else, but also because basic changes that prepared the ground for music listening as a technology of the self, with which we are familiar today, took place in the decades before hi-fi, ubiquitous music, and the Walkman. The chapter ends with an overview showing how the tendencies observed continued after mid-century. The chapter considers several interrelated main questions: How was the gramophone used and what social roles did it play? Who listened? What did they listen to? When and where did they listen and why?

1 Playing the Gramophone before the 1920s

The scene for recorded music during the first decades of the twentieth century was not dominated by classical or “serious” music. Instead, it was the popular music of the day that sold on record, in Stockholm as much as in many other cities of Europe. However, the “popular” could range from the most trivial fads, speeches by notable persons, stories, and gags, to the inclusion of what in retrospect can be described as “middle music,” including opera arias by an international star such as Enrico Caruso. The latter category was well represent-

ed at many so-called gramophone concerts that were given in the Swedish capital from about 1900 to 1915. Whereas the earliest gramophone concerts of this period tended to put the technology itself on display (they were often sponsored by the manufacturing company), they soon transformed into more regular entertainment offerings. Caruso could be found on the same bills as the Italian coloratura soprano Luisa Tetrazzini and the local baritone John Forsell, all performing on gramophone while being accompanied by a local string orchestra playing live at the city's fancier restaurants. The presence of foreign names on the bill should not come as a surprise, however, since in contrast to popular music, opera was an international genre with international stars such as the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, long before the entry of phonography.

Less upmarket locales for gramophone playing during the first decades of the century were the countryside fairs where one could listen for a small amount of money to both music and various spoken entertainment. Likewise, many small-town cafés held a gramophone to play background music for their customers. And although far from every household owned a gramophone, those who did usually lent it to their friends and neighbors when there was an engagement or wedding party or just an occasion for youth to come together to dance.

The popularity of the gramophone stood in stark contrast to the aversion and even hostility that recording technology met with in the upper-class *salong* (salon). In those circles, the gramophone, as a machine and a technological innovation, was a sign of civilization gone astray. The fact that the *salongsgrammofon* (common name for luxurious cabinet gramophones) was marketed by Stockholm retailers already in 1917 did not matter much. As to its content, the cylinders and discs were too obviously carriers of mass cultural expressions—"anesthetics of pleasure," to use a phrase from 1910 by the Swedish civilization critic Vitalis Norström—to be embraced by the cultural establishment.

But how was recorded music perceived during these various occasions, given the fact that it was recorded and not performed "live"? Considering the less fashionable types of occasion, the scarce sources reveal a rather pragmatic attitude to the recordings. The music played on the gramophone should be good to dance to, and the records should play the songs that those who had gathered liked to hear. The same was true for the gramophone concerts. Considering that the artists headlined in the advertisements were well-known opera stars from what can be described as the "live" stage (the expression does not occur in musical contexts until the 1920s), it is not unlikely that the recordings were heard as a sort of sonic postcards. This would be in line with Thomas A. Edison's suggestion in 1877 that the recordings of his then newly invented phonograph could be used as "family records" (including "the last words of dying persons"). However, it is important to note here that Edison did not care much for the identity of the

artists on his recordings, focusing instead on the technological standard of his equipment. As he put it in a letter in 1912, “[w]e care nothing for the reputation of the artists, singers, or instrumentalists. [...] All that we desire is that the voice shall be as perfect as possible.”¹ Indicative of a similar indifference toward the identity of the artists are advertisements in Sweden of, for instance, the Favorite label in 1905, marketing its records by only mentioning the song titles in its repertoire, and the Pathéphon label, which still in 1916 could announce records perfect for the summer’s dance occasions without mentioning either name of the tune or artist.

Taken together, the pragmatic stance toward music played for dance and for atmosphere—at humble small-town cafés as well as gramophone concerts given at high-end big-city restaurants—and the industry’s often blatant disinterest in the personal identities of the artists indicate that many considered the gramophone more or less a mechanical instrument, like a music box or a barrel organ. With reference to the anonymity of recorded artists, one may even say that the gramophone was regarded as a “mechanical musician.”

2 Listening to Records after 1920: The Emergence of New Media Aesthetics

The early phonograph and gramophone were “played” rather than “listened to.” With few exceptions, the gramophone and its records were described in the press as something one listened to only after the 1920s. However, a change in attitude can be observed already at the outset of the decade. In 1923, possibly the earliest record review in Sweden was printed in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet*. It was a piece on a recording of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *Symphonie Pathétique* with the Royal Albert Hall Orchestra on His Master’s Voice. The review differs from, but was quite likely inspired by, the review of the same recording in the British *Gramophone* journal earlier the same year. Toward the turn of the decade, the same newspaper continued to review both classical and popular records on a more regular basis under headings such as *Grammofonmusik under kritik* (Gramophone Music under Criticism), *Grammofonrevy* (Gramophone Review), and *Inspelat och avlyssnat* (Recorded and Monitored). In addition, it also reviewed the new electronic recording and playback technology that had been introduced internationally in 1925, and which became commercially available in Sweden a year later.

The emergence of record reviews is important. As these reviews embraced a technological innovation that had been targeted by a critique that accused it of

being detrimental to culture with a capital “C,” they tied phonography to established cultural values. Initially modeled on the traditional concert review, the record review added an important aura of seriousness to the recording medium by treating it as being worthy of qualified discussion. The record review also represented an implicit reference to solitary listening in a shielded space as it resulted, sometimes explicitly, from repeated listening by the reviewer, something that was hardly possible in public settings.

The new attitude toward recorded music can be found in reviews toward the end of the 1930s by *Svenska Dagbladet*’s critic Kajsa Rootzén. In a review on 17 April 1938, Rootzén criticizes recordings of classical music generally, not only for their limited sound reproduction but also for being no more than a “surrogate” for the collective concert context as well as for domestic singing and instrument playing—what she describes as music’s “intrinsic value.” However, a week later, in a review of a recording of Johannes Brahms’s Violin Sonata in d minor, Rootzén contends that it is “particularly suitable for private company.” The music of a composer like Brahms, Rootzén goes on to say, may even provide “consolation and security, uplift and support.” That Rootzén is talking about the music on record, not as heard in a concert performance, is obvious from the context of the review. And this fact is significantly emphasized when she speaks of “the immediately present music” of the records being hampered only by the limitations of the recording technology, that is to say not by the medium as such.

In sum, one can say that Rootzén did not hear the recorded music as some replication by a mechanical music machine, neither as some sonic postcard nor as mere documentation of a past performance event; instead, she listened to music that appeared to her as “immediately present.” However, recorded music was still regarded as inferior to live performance. In the first review, Rootzén writes about the conductor Arturo Toscanini:

The Italian maestro has an ability like maybe no other to make the air vibrate with intensity around a gramophone record [...] [B]ut equal to what he can bestow in terms of clarity and novelty at the concert podium it will not be.

But the fact that she makes the comparison, and even talks about recordings as vibrant, shows that recorded music was now taken seriously. It shows that recorded music was ascribed aesthetic value. And the fact that listening to immediately present music with aesthetic value on record in private may give “consolation and security” and “uplifting and support” indicates that listening to classical music on record may serve as a serious and multifaceted technology of the self. This is a quality that recordings of classical music would share

with popular music, from the 1930s onward, although the standards of the self differed significantly.

3 Listen to Me Tonight: Performing for the Solitary Listener

A change in listening attitudes to popular music on record can be observed by comparing three representations from three different decades in the weekly *Hem-mets Journal* (The Home's Journal). The first, from early 1923, is an advertisement promoting His Master's Voice records with an advertisement displaying not only the company's familiar logotype but also a picture of two women talking next to a luxurious gramophone cabinet, the one telling the other: "You can't imagine, but I have put together such a nice program for our next dance evening!" Here the gramophone is still regarded as a mechanical instrument, playing the music that best suits the occasion, a stand-in for a "real" musician or ensemble in a collective situation. The second example is from a short story published eleven years later, in 1934, with an illustration of two women who, according to the caption, "both listened pensively to the male voice singing in the gramophone: 'only friends, only friends...'" The shift in view in this example is obvious: the two women are pictured as listening to a recorded voice, not to a mechanical musician. And equally significant, they are listening "pensively" to the words sung. The third and last example is from 1942, an advertisement for AGA radio gramophones, picturing a woman sitting alone in front of her record player and imagining singing together with the recorded star. According to the words of the ad "Greta's chair in the dance-hall is empty—she has found something better. Of course, it can be fun to go out and dance sometime, Greta says, but it is the music one wants... just imagine, Frank Sinatra directly from New York..."

Two things stand out here. First, imagining singing with Sinatra is facilitated not just by the recording of his singing, but by his full presence: Sinatra sings "directly from New York" to Greta. And he does so every time she chooses to listen to the record. And second, Greta has no company except for the recorded artist: she listens alone. Similar AGA ads from the same period depicted what one may assume to be Greta's brother and father, the one dreaming of playing in a jazz band and the other of scantily dressed female vocalists—both alone in their listening. Such themes as presence, or the here and now, and listening alone, or music that is suitable for private company, are familiar from classical music. However, one may also get the impression, especially when regarding the ads in chronological succession, that the experience of an intimate here and now

with the artist is more or less dependent on the solitude of the listening situation.

This impression is further strengthened in a concert review in *Svenska Dagbladet* from 13 September 1936, whose author, writing under the pen name “Dixie,” evaluates a performance in Stockholm by Viennese chanson and cabaret singer Greta Keller. “Keller,” the reviewer boldly states, “is the priestess of intimate art.” But no matter how well the accompanying orchestra has succeeded in “appropriating the discrete delicacy necessary” for Keller’s performance, it is doomed to fail in its mission because “in her individual way [she] gets close to us when her voice whispers with melancholy from the gramophone or the radio, [which] one cannot obtain from the cabaret scene. Isn’t this a paradox?”

The review claims that the intimate presence of the artist is best experienced when listening to her records on gramophone or broadcast through radio. This seeming “paradox” was made possible by the electric microphone (introduced in Sweden in 1926), which allowed artists to sing in a soft and intimate manner rather than with the loud and voluminous technique that had previously been required for a vocalist to be heard in big halls. Reminiscent of Rootzén’s remark about the suitability for one-to-one “private company,” the description of Keller’s singing as an “intimate art” may quite plausibly make the reader conclude that the recordings are best listened to in solitude.

Less of a paradox is that Keller was one among many. She demonstrated a vocal technique known as “crooning” in the USA, and made famous in Europe by vocalists such as Jean Sablon, Lucienne Boyer, and Paul O’Montis. In Sweden, the foremost representative of the technique was Sven-Olof Sandberg, who pioneered electric recording in 1927 and whose “lovesick” baritone bestowed upon him nicknames such as “the microphone voice,” “SOS,” and “the gramophone enchanter.” Sandberg’s paraphrase of the lyrics to the American song *Are you Listening in Tonight, Mother Dear?*—where “listening in” is changed to “listening to me”—was a big hit and is a case in point. Commenting on Sandberg’s technique 30 years after the occasion, former collaborator and radio producer Sven Jerling catches the gist of the new way of singing: “He [Sandberg] intuitively grasped what many radio announcers and radio artists still hadn’t: it’s not a great auditorium they’re addressing, its *one single* individual, alone in front of the receiver.”²

This description, of both the singer behind the microphone and the listener alone in the front of a radio receiver or a gramophone, offers insight into the particular mode of listening made available by this new way of performing popular music: as the listener, I am alone in the encounter with the singer who sings only for me. The intimate and confidential effect was further enhanced by the specific sound production and recording aesthetics. Recordings of orchestral music

strove to capture a concert feeling and turn the listener's home into a concert hall, regardless of the fact that listeners had to change record sides every four minutes. In contrast, much popular music of the 1930s and 1940s achieved its effect through a "dry" and limited space approach to sound production. With a relatively depthless sound quality, it rather had the effect of seemingly transporting the vocalist into the intimate vicinity of the listener's private living room.

As in the reviews of classical music, we can extract from these examples a transformation of attitudes and ways of listening. Obviously, the gramophone is not a mechanical instrument any longer (except for the early His Master's Voice ad), it is a medium capable of transporting the vocalist persona to the listener, staging a present moment rather than a documented past performance. The focus is increasingly on the authentic voice, whereas the artificiality of the technology slips into the background. Considering the social aspect, the distinction between active partaking and passive listening notably gives way to its inverse correlative, where the modern individual listens alone in front of the loudspeaker, rather than together with peers in a group. All this has relevance for the role of music as self-technology, but before looking into the differences of how this role was performed in popular and classical music, a note will be made on the spatial setting for solitary listening.

4 The Living Room: A Place for Solitary Listening

The gramophone was not allowed into the upper-class *salong* of the early decades. However, from the 1920s onward, popular music appeared to have embraced the new listening practice more or less wholeheartedly. It seems to be no mere coincidence that in the 1926 housing exhibition Bygge och Bo (Building and dwelling), the gramophone was assigned its very own place in the plan for a 40 m² flat. Although the apartment was designed for a family of four persons and therefore could hardly have afforded solitude during any longer time spans, the gramophone's presence in the plan was a sign of its subsequent status. Notably the exhibition promoted the modern living room as opposed to the old upper-class *salong*. Whereas the *salong* was accused of being overloaded and dysfunctional, the modern living room was said to give "the richest possible impression through the smallest means."

Bygge och Bo was followed in 1930 by the Stockholm Exhibition, which focused on urban planning, architecture, and design. It signaled a breakthrough in Sweden for modernist ideals. With its slogan "acceptera!," it stood in opposition

to the conservative civilization critique. With its functionalist aesthetic ideals, it came to serve as an ideological basis for the national housing policy well into the 1970s. Symptomatically, the manifesto that followed the exhibition displayed a photo of a gramophone with a caption stating that “[l]uxury is for us the highest degree of quality, not of splendor.” The modernist movement’s rejection of nonfunctional ornamentation did not preclude owning a mechanical instrument such as the gramophone, as long as it was well made and fulfilled its recreational function.

An interesting but unacknowledged and hardly intended model for the particular space required for the gramophone and its music can be observed in advertisements for gramophones starting already in 1923 and for records a few years later. In these advertisements, retailers in Stockholm boast specially designed listening booths “furnished according to English/American principles.” The significance of these listening booths is not primarily that they allowed the listener to appreciate the fidelity of the sound reproduction technology. The importance is rather the provision of a shielded space where the listener was able to hear music while being more or less undisturbed and unobserved. Expressed in marketing terms of the day, they were “comfortable listening rooms where each and every one in peace and quiet and in a pleasant environment can make their own choice.”

This setting differs radically from the old *salong* as well as from the phonograph attractions at countryside fairs, both of which were collective displays. In the *salong*, the music was played and listened to in the company of others, and when the recorded sounds at the fairs were audible only through rubber tubes, the listening act and reactions of the listeners were part of the spectacle. Even the public phonograph parlors, *gabinetes fonográficos*, and the *salons du phonographe*, which could be found in the big cities of the Western world already around the turn of the century, were social venues. In this, they differ from their shielded successors of the 1920s.

As a model for listening to recorded music, the listening booth of the 1920s conveyed a new ideal according to which listening to music is best done in solitude in a room specially furnished for this purpose. One could also say that the living room is best seen furnished so as to facilitate the undisturbed listening to music. That point was even more pressing as the gramophone was situated in apartment plans and thus became part of the very definition of what kind of space the living room was: a place for recreation, for mood regulation, and for identity reinforcement.

5 Listening for Identification: Character, Personality, and Self-Technology

As pointed out, record companies such as Edison's Speaking Phonograph Company, Favorite, and Pathéfon did not market until the 1920s their artists to any considerable extent. However, one well-known exception stands out. Italian vocalist Caruso not only was marketed, but was also extensively promoted as a unique personality. In contrast to its competitors, the Victor Talking Machine Company, to which Caruso was signed, went out of its way to present its artist both in its advertisement campaigns and in its public relations, providing the press with prefabricated stories and "news." As a media celebrity of the day, Caruso was featured as extrovert and charming, a person with a Latin heart and temper. Although he never performed in Sweden, he was well known there. His name was mentioned in a daily paper in the country on average every third day, from his signing with the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1903 to his death in 1921. Likewise, his singing was frequently heard at public gramophone concerts at various cafés and restaurants.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable difference both in reception, impact, and display between Caruso and subsequent vocalists such as Keller and Sandberg—differences that shed light on how the solitary listening that emerged during the interwar period afforded music as a self-technology. To begin with, given the widespread criticism from the "civilized" listeners of the time, it is quite unlikely that Caruso's recordings were heard in the upper-class *salongs* of Sweden to any considerable extent. Contrary to the aims of the company's Red Seal series—featuring only the artists the company wanted to boost as culturally prestigious—Caruso's recordings belonged to the middle music segment. It can therefore be rightfully assumed that solitary listening to his recordings—listening alone in front of a gramophone or a radio in secluded and undisturbed spaces—occurred commonly only after the artist's passing in the 1920s. Caruso's acoustic recordings were electronically restored already in the early 1930s, and as such reviewed by the Stockholm press.

It is in many ways instructive to contrast Caruso with subsequent artists such as Keller and Sandberg. Although by the 1930s, most record labels had come to follow the Victor Talking Machine Company in promoting their artists, Keller appears as in many ways an antithesis of Caruso. Appealing to an entirely different kind of listener, Keller staged a melancholic personality with an unobtrusive appearance and a voice soft and whispering. Keller sang through a microphone also in concert; still, a reviewer of a Stockholm concert expressed his preference to listen to her on record: "The mechanical reproduction brings the artist

closer than does her presence in flesh and blood.”³ Keller’s recordings, the first of which appeared almost a decade after Caruso’s last, thus seemed to have been predestined for solitary listening. This was not only because of the increasing availability of secluded domestic space from the 1930s onward, but also because of Keller’s personal style of *communication*. This is not to say that her style was entirely unique (it was not) but that it was *personal* in a way that was new in popular music.

Much of what can be said about Keller can also be said about Sandberg. Although he had a wider vocal range than Keller, his baritone was relaxed and equalized over the whole register, which proved to be an effective instrument in the personal communication through the recording medium. It can be mentioned in passing that Sandberg also sang opera and made his debut to some acclaim in Stockholm in 1940. In this, he can be seen as a curiously inverse image of an artist such as Caruso as well as of Sandberg’s contemporary countryman Jussi Björling, who both mixed their “serious” opera repertoires with popular melodies (Björling debuted on record as a solo artist at about the same time as Sandberg with a popularly oriented repertoire). Like Keller, Sandberg appeared as anything but extrovert. Although he was praised for his beautiful voice, he was often scorned and dismissed for his “unmanly,” sensitive appearance and repertoire: the press lambasted the music as “sentimental” and Sandberg’s delivery as “greasy,” adding up to no more than “tasteless drivel.” However, listeners who wrote to Swedish radio described Sandberg as an interpreter of “our most beautiful feelings.” Press reviews of popular music were never as comprehensive and ambitious as Rootzén’s reviews of classical records. But what did these letters respond to?

The positive opinions shining forth in letters from the audience can be partly explained in terms of the personal tone of the lyrics. In contrast to repertoires of earlier times, the addressee of the lyrics is an often individualized and personalized “you” appealed to by the vocalist/sender, such as in Sandberg’s *Are You Listening to Me Tonight, Mother Dear?* (which, certainly, may also invite the listener to identify with the singer’s “I”). Together with a sound production simulating a small and private room ambience, this enabled a turning of the listening situation into what may resemble a confidential talk between intimates, and as such the mere situation may affect the listener in a positive way. Sandberg’s lyrics struck a profound emotional chord among his listeners when heard on record, whereas much of the classical music broadcast on national radio was dismissed by many listeners (judging from the many complaints sent by mail to the radio station) as unintelligible and nonsensical.

Even more striking is that when it comes to recordings of popular music, it is not just a question of change of the technical, social, and spiritual aspects.

Whereas these aspects seem to cluster around the particular links of the semiotic communication chain—sender, medium, message, and addressee—much of the recorded popular music of the day seems to emphasize the communication situation as such. When seen in context, many of the recorded songs by, for instance, Keller and Sandberg actualize a distinction between (two-way) communication and (one-way) contemplation.

Although one can see how the record industry early on used media in various ways (advertisements, public relations, and the Red Seal star label, etc.) to sell its products in terms of a public persona, a personalized mode of listening to records that provided a communicative and quasi-dialogic attitude toward the artist occurred in Sweden and elsewhere primarily during the interwar years. This attitude was directed in particular at so-called microphone singers like Keller and Sandberg toward the end of the decade, and it would be firmly established during the subsequent decade.

Once this mode of listening was in place, it was possible to see also how it differed from the focused and contemplative mode of listening assumed by a reviewer of classical music such as Rootzén. When, in a review on 1 January 1939, Rootzén refers to Franz Schubert's "poor and troublesome life," she did not mean to arouse pity in the listener. Instead, the review breathed admiration and esteem for Schubert's capacity to overcome melancholy when facing death and composing a symphony (his Ninth) full of "singing power [and] inexhaustible rivers of light." One can rightly say that Schubert's symphony was regarded as a monument over its creator's exemplary *character*, rather than as an expression of his private *personality*. An overcoming rather than an indulging in common emotion was what the reviewer wanted the listener to hear in the recording of the work. The difference from and distance to the private, intimate, and personal feelings expressed and aroused by the sentimental songs of the popular idiom is striking: the one evoking universal values of character held up to the listener as ideals to pursue, and the other suggesting individual traits of personality to be tested and tried out.

6 After the War: New Rooms for Music as Self-Technology

The new mode of solitary listening to music, emerging during the interwar years, had come to stay. Although it never displaced the "old" way of listening to music—collective and more or less participative singing or playing—after the Second World War, solitary listening and its self-technological possibilities were diffused

to ever more spaces, places, and situations of everyday life. It was helped by various technical innovations of sound recording and reproduction. For instance, whereas the electric microphone and the electric pickup saw the light of day already in the 1920s and the 1930s respectively, the long-playing vinyl record (LP) was introduced in 1948 and became stereophonic ten years later.

Although the expression can be found in the 1930s, it is not until the mid-1950s that the concept of hi-fi (short for high fidelity)—“launched by the Americans,” as the journal *Estrad* put it in 1954—appeared regularly in Swedish contexts.⁴ Originally an expression referring to sound technology’s ability to reproduce recorded sound as “truthfully” as possible (thus the “fidelity” to the sound source), it soon became an expression implicitly connecting the new stereo technology to connoisseur listeners. Moreover, when hi-fi was discussed in papers and journals, it often went together with an attempt at disciplining the listening practice. Statements such as “[y]ou will find that you hitherto have listened to mechanical music [sic] in a totally erroneous way” and “[t]rain the ear correctly from the start” were common. In addition to a strong focus on technicalities of the equipment, the disciplining often concerned the music, as in the following quote from the July issue of the journal *Musikrevy* in 1959:

Then you should relax, sit still and comfortably and listen relaxedly like at an ordinary concert. Concentration should be directed toward hearing stereo music as an artistic experience rather than exploring acoustic or technical details.⁵

The quote points to aspects that go well beyond the scope of this chapter, such as the extent to which and in which ways recorded music was still heard as a documentation of a previous event (“an ordinary concert”) or whether the recording was heard as a generic aesthetic expression (“an artistic experience”). Equally important, the quote also indicates how a way of focused listening to musical detail and theme became extended from classical music to include popular music, a change in listening that ultimately paved the way for ambitious pop and rock albums that would follow in the wake of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and Frank Zappa’s *Freak Out!* (1966).

Considering hi-fi, the year 1960 saw the advent of a new journal devoted exclusively to the subject, *Musik och ljudteknik* (Music and Sound Technology). Besides technical and aesthetic matters, the journal also brought up a rather different and hitherto neglected issue, namely the gendering of solitary living room listening. In the following quote from the March issue in 1960, two distinct gender-specific subject positions are simultaneously described and ascertained, one explicit and the other implicit:

The greatest resistance raised primarily by wives toward the acquisition of a system for high-quality sound reproduction is usually based on two recurrent arguments: 1) loudspeakers are ugly and too bulky for modern flats and 2) high-class loudspeakers are disproportionately expensive.⁶

The presumably male reader learns from this and other articles that it is “the husband” who listens appropriately and purchases the speakers despite the resistance from “his wife.” Judging from a telling advertisement of the day, wives were not particularly welcome in the hi-fi milieu: “Make your wife happy,” the ad boldly asserted, “with an extra loudspeaker in the kitchen.” In terms of self-technology, and judging from the hi-fi discourse presented in journals, one may rightfully assume that buying and listening to hi-fi stereo equipment was—and perhaps still is today—a way of *doing (male) gender*.

Corresponding ways of doing identification work through the solitary listening to music can be traced, following the advice of the advertisement above, to other rooms as well. Not only was the husband in the mentioned ad suggested to make his wife happy “with an extra loudspeaker in the kitchen,” it was further suggested that “the rest of the family” got “a loudspeaker in the bedroom or some other space.” Whoever took care of the purchases, the increasing market supply of cheap portable gramophones made it possible for many teenagers to buy and listen to single records (less expensive than LPs) in their own bedrooms. Also important was the cassette tape, introduced in 1963, and the radio recorder, launched three years later. With this inexpensive equipment, which had become ubiquitous by the end of the 1970s, it was possible both to record and replay broadcast music. This was done with songs towering the hit lists of radio programs like *Tio i topp* (Ten at top), from 1961 to 1974; followed by shows like *Poporama* and *Discorama* in the 1970s; and *Tracks* in the 1980s and 1990s, but also with a host of radio shows during the same decades directed at more narrow tastes.

The teenage bedroom thus turned into an important space for solitary listening, enabling cultivation of the adolescent’s private self and a renegotiation of the relationship with parents, both being important in the process of growing up. The aspects of solitary listening already mentioned in relation to the microphone singers of the 1920s and 1930s, emphasizing the communicative and quasi-dialogical qualities, were particularly actuated by singers/songwriters such as Joni Mitchell, whose personal lyrics distanced the songs from the average pop music idiom. And although solitary bedroom listening has been particularly associated with young girls, it is quite likely that it played more or less the same role for boys.⁷ Moreover, the music did not necessarily have to have the poetic and “serious” aura of a Joni Mitchell. As popular music recordings in the course

of the second half of the century became more oriented toward adolescents, so did the contents of the lyrics, which in being superficially “trivial” provided a distracted and even ruminative listening equally focused on the listener’s own self and situation, whether the music was ABBA or Entombed.

7 Listening Practices Moving Out of the Home

The living room had served as an ideal setting for solitary listening since the 1920s. However, there was an early competitor outside the safe walls of the family home: the automobile, which was available with a radio from around 1930. A luxury item at the time of its introduction, the car radio soon became everyman’s property. By the mid-1970s, the journal *Stereo Hifi* reported Swedish sales of car stereos being the highest in the world per capita.

While the car has always been a transportation utility, for many the car also served as a refuge, for instance when the home was crowded with other family members or too demanding with inescapable duties and responsibilities. Against that backdrop, the car became the truly shielded room where one could be alone and undisturbed. Going away with the car became an escape, a justifiable one or not. The car was particularly suited as a place for music listening due to its limited space, which brought the listener closer to the sound source. In this way, it allowed for more effective immersion in the music than was often possible at home in the living room.

For the purpose of driving, music may fulfill functions such as enhancing concentration and counteracting dreariness and fatigue. But music may also provide self-technological functions that are specific to the driving situation. In an investigation carried out during the very last years of the century, “existential” qualities stand out as being important to drivers listening to music.⁸ “Existential” here means a subjective feeling of heightened presence, more or less intentionally sought after as remedy in a stressful everyday life where the self was often experienced as fractured. This could take different forms of rehabilitation, with significant variations between sexes, age groups, and educational backgrounds. However, two alternatives stand out in the investigation. On the one hand, there was a strong tendency toward seeking solitary space for undisturbed reassembly of a fractured self. On the other hand, there was also a more expressive and outward-directed tendency whereby sound and speed were experienced as strengthening each other. Driving fast and playing music loud resulted in an intensified sense of self.

A similar emphasis on the connection between speed and sound is found in what can be described as the ultimate portable music-listening device, including

its Swedish popular denomination. The device is the Sony Walkman, a pocket-sized portable cassette player, launched around 1980 in Europe. In Sweden, it was sold under the name Freestyle, due to its popularity among downhill freestyle skiers. Equally important for its success were the minimally sized earphones or earbuds that enabled mobile activities. Whereas it may initially have seemed a gimmick for various speedy outdoor sports, the use of the Walkman—the name of the device becoming a generic label for all portable players—increased continuously over the decades, eventually paving the way for iPods and cellphones in the new millennium.

The role of the Walkman for the individual listener's ability to seize both urban space and time through the soundtracking of everyday-life situations is well known. However, the use of personally compiled sets of songs on the cassette tapes should not be underestimated (not least since it points toward today's streamed playlists). The recording and exchanging of mixed cassette tapes among teenagers, which became a widespread activity from the 1970s to the 1990s, enabled the expression and articulation of self-identity in terms of personal taste and preferences. But it was certainly not limited to adolescents. And although not explicitly mentioned in the examples of solitary listening given here, jazz, classical, and other styles of music were recorded, played, and listened to, with more or less the same potential for technologies of self-care. In retrospect, it has been pointed out how self-compiled mixtapes came to "anchor personal memory" by providing "contextual narrative[s] for channeling concrete feelings or experiences; they 'burn' certain impressions into the mind, consigning audio-image maps to memory."⁹ It may be assumed that no music was precluded from playing such roles.

Conclusion: Solitary Listening in Pursuit of Personality

Music's therapeutic and healing powers have been known for millennia. But the power of music was in the unapproachable hands of the magus musician. What is new in the contemporary period is that the affective power of music becomes increasingly available to the individual listener—music is no longer just a technology of the self but a *self-technology*, meaning that it is a technology available to each and every one as a self-care carried out by oneself. The primary means for this self-technology initially were the gramophone and the radio. As the century proceeded, new technologies were added, especially magnetic tape recording. The tape recorder, introduced in the 1950s, is particularly significant in that

it was not only portable, like many types of gramophone; in its 1979 Walkman cassette version, it also allowed for listening while moving around, through headphones, to a prerecorded soundtrack of one's own compilation. With headphones—becoming demonstratively bigger around the turn of the millennium—the solitary space of the living room would eventually become transferrable as a sonic bubble into public space.

This transfer of one's sonic bubble into public space can, in its turn, be seen as both projective and introjective. It is well known that solitude as such may make available both imaginatively involvement in multiple realities as well as the trying out and testing of alternative identities in such imagined realities. While this may be described as aspects of introjection, a corresponding outward tendency can also be discerned. Once solitude becomes mobile, as in solitary listening through headphones, the walls of the domestic living room are transgressed, enabling a projection and expansion of the listener's subjective world into the swarm of public space. This tendency has been described as an extension of interior life "that work[s] to subjectivize such spaces and transform them into arenas of personal experience."¹⁰ Taken together with, for instance, the widespread sharing and communicating of personal soundtracks in the form of playlists on streaming sites, this can be seen as a vital social circuit in what may otherwise appear as a stifflingly solipsistic and self-centered activity. In the end, and despite the cloistering tendencies of solitary listening, the self-technological aspects of music would still be social activities.

Finally, one can say that in as much as the practice of solitary listening and music's role as a technology of the self have been of vital importance for each other, their intertwined development warrants further investigation that takes the various transformations of the values and conceptualizations of music into consideration. In Europe, as the Swedish case suggests, this process began around the turn of the century and accelerated from the 1920s onward. As a playback technology, music recording turned from a machine, a mechanical musician utilized at communal gatherings, to a documentary of past performance events, to an object repeatedly instantiating an imaginary here and now. Electronic microphones made it possible to record soft voices suitable for creating an atmosphere of intimacy and privacy where the listener could be "alone" with the artist. Sound production simulating a small and private room ambience further provided various modes of listening, such as engaging in a quasi-dialogic relationship with the singer's persona, or identification by the listener with this persona, or even a total immersion with the particular soundscape of the recording. And whereas classical music tended to evoke universal values of character

for the listener to pursue, popular music offered individual traits of personality, or identities, to be tested and tried out—emotional rooms or images in or around which temporary self-images and self-conceptions could be balanced and attuned. Once this practice of listening was embraced, music could function as an emotional memory—a soundtrack of my life—that could be recalled in critical situations or when one’s identity needed boosting in more everyday situations.

As this chapter has shown, the entry of electric recording and playback at the end of the 1920s was critical in the European history of music, arriving on the scene at the same time as the modern living room and the individual needs of personal identifications. To repeat, it is a process that continues to this day. And while this chapter started at the beginning of the twentieth century, the insight of the young saleswoman quoted at the outset—that “one’s mood regulates itself amongst the gramophones”—is echoed in the context of solitary music listening at the end of the century by the Icelandic singer Björk in her 1995 song *Headphones*, whose lyrics perfectly encapsulates solitary listening as a technology of the self.

Genius to fall asleep
 To your tape last night
 (So warm)
 Sounds go through the muscles
 These abstract wordless movements
 They start off cells that
 Haven’t been touched before
 These cells are virgins
 (Waking up slowly)

My headphones
 They saved my life
 Your tape
 It lulled me to sleep
 To sleep, to sleep

Nothing will be the same
 (I’m fast asleep)
 I like this resonance
 It elevates me
 I don’t recognize myself
 This is very interesting...

Notes

1 Quoted in David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 128.

2 Quoted in Karin Strand, "Mikrofonsångaren: Sven-Olof Sandberg och gestaltningen av närhet och distans i de tidiga elektriska ljudmedierna," in *Musikens Medialisering och Musikaliseringen av Medier och Vardagsliv i Sverige*, ed. Ulrik Volgsten (Lund: Mediehistoriskt arkiv, 2019), 122.

3 Quoted in *ibid.*

4 The following paragraphs on hi-fi culture in Sweden are largely based on Alf Björnberg, "Learning to Listen to Perfect Sound: Hi-fi Culture and Changes in Modes of Listening, 1950–80," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 105–129.

5 Quoted in *ibid.*, 114–115.

6 Quoted in *ibid.*, 117.

7 See Reed Larson, "Secrets in the Bedroom: Adolescents' Private Use of Media," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24 (1995): 535–550.

8 See Carin Öblad, *Att använda musik: Om bilen som konsertlokal* (Göteborg: Institutionen för musikvetenskap, 2000).

9 José van Dijk, "Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective Memory," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23 (2006): 357–374.

10 Tobias Pontara and Ulrik Volgsten, "Musicalization and Mediatization," in *Dynamics of Mediatization: Institutional Change and Everyday Transformations in a Digital Age*, ed. Olivier Driessens, Göran Bolin, Andreas Hepp, and Stig Hjarvard (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 269.

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