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## **Do people value recorded music?**

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**Abstract:** How much do the majority of people value music, and can or should that level of value be reflected in music's economic value? The dramatic decline in the economic value of recorded popular music in the twenty-first century has prompted much debate about music being 'devalued' and the perceived 'value gap' between music's socio-cultural and economic values. Using the economic decline of recorded music as a springboard, this paper takes a different approach, however. It offers a theoretical analysis of popular music consumption practices organised thematically in terms of 'music as object' (focusing on the social values generated and perceived by recorded music artefacts) and 'music as sound' (focusing on the way that most contemporary musical experiences are characterised by music being background sound or accompaniment). Overall, the argument is that 'music' may not be as culturally valued by people as is commonly assumed. The way that music operates as a low-value entity to many people is perhaps reflected in the cultural and economic contours of the digital music industry, though they are not caused by digitisation *per se*.

**Keywords:** Value, popular music, recorded music, music industry, records, ubiquitous listening, consumption

**9542 words, including references**

## Do people value recorded music?

Lee Marshall<sup>1</sup>

The 'value' of popular music in the digital environment has been a subject of controversy across all three of the main music industry sectors. For example, within the live sector there have been debates about high ticket prices and secondary selling practices while, in music publishing, there are disputes about royalty levels to songwriters from web broadcasters and streaming services. The debates have been loudest and longest in the recorded sector, however. In recent years, the controversies have often concerned music streaming services. For example, there has been resentment from some musicians over the micro-payments that individual streams generate while Taylor Swift, among others, has criticised the existence of 'freemium' models that allow people to listen to music without payment. Overall, the prominent claim is that 'music' (which primarily is assumed to mean 'recorded music') has been 'devalued', firstly by piracy and latterly by streaming services. YouTube has become a particular site of contention, with the recording industry propagating the idea of 'the value gap' to argue that they are not receiving fair reward for the amount of music used on the site and others like it (eg IFPI, 2016:22-4).

The 'value gap' is merely the latest in a line of rhetorical devices used by the recording industry in its lobbying attempts to attain legal changes preferential to its business model (see, for example, Smirke 2018). Underpinning many of these claims, however, is an assumption that (recorded) music is highly valued by many people, even if that high social value is not being adequately captured by economic value. In this paper, I want to question that core assumption and suggest that (recorded) popular music may not be as highly valued by people as commonly assumed. Overall, I would suggest that those most invested in music – such as musicians, fans, industry workers, critics and scholars – tend to overstate the universality of musical experience and the level of investment that 'non-specialist' people have in music. To put my argument bluntly: in the Western world at least, most people don't value (recorded) music very much.

Having made such a blunt claim, I will now offer some provisos. Firstly, I am sidestepping the question of whether I can make this claim of 'music' generally. While the arguments made in this paper can strictly only be applied to 'recorded music', it is undoubtedly true that in the developed world the vast majority of musical engagement is with recorded music and to many people 'music' and 'recorded music' are synonymous. It may therefore be plausible to make the broader claim about music generally, but this is contested ontological territory with insufficient space to explore here. Secondly, in addressing the question of value, I am aware that I am stepping into a domain with well-established traditions and controversies. While neo-classical conceptualisations of economic value remain dominant in many ways, their hegemony has been challenged from a variety of perspectives. In recent years there has been growing awareness of the socially constructed nature of value, from within economics itself (e.g. behavioural economics) as well as new fields such as valuation studies. Muneisa (2011), for example, argues for abandoning 'value' as an object of enquiry in favour of a

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focus on 'valuation'. While sympathetic to these more sociological perspectives, this paper will not explicitly address them as its main focus is not on the quantification of value *per se*. Rather, it is rooted in the sociology of popular music and focuses on practices of music consumption. It questions whether recorded music is 'valued' by the majority of consumers in the sense of being *appreciated* rather than in the sense of being *appraised* – though there is discussion of how particular kinds of (non)appreciation may be reflected in music industry economics. While I would not want to argue that the commercial value of recorded music 'proves' anything, it may be that music's diminished economic value does actually reflect something about its socio-cultural value that is worth investigating. Thirdly, it is important to highlight that I am in no way making a claim about all music consumers. Obviously, humans value music in many different ways and to many different extents. It is clear that music is extremely valuable to many people - the arguments in this paper are not about them but this is not to suggest that they do not exist or that their experiences are unimportant. I would, however, suggest that they are a minority of music consumers and the argument I am outlining reflects the majority experience in the Western world. Finally, it is important to point out that this is not necessarily a claim about change over time: I am not saying that people used to value music and they don't now. That might be so but, equally, perhaps music was economically over-valued in the past. Indeed, elements of my argument may lead to a reappraisal of conventional narratives regarding the supposed decline in music's value for while 'digitisation' is often assumed as having resulted in people valuing music less (both socially and economically), it is instead possible to see digitisation as merely revealing more long-standing sociological currents in popular music consumption.

### **Theories of economic and cultural value**

In arguments that music has been 'devalued' or that there is a 'value gap', a core assumption is that the socio-cultural value of something can, and indeed should, be reflected in its economic value. This reflects much common sense thinking about value, though it is not universally accepted. The question of whether socio-cultural value can be captured in economic value is highly complex and traverses many fields of enquiry which can only be hinted at here. Nonetheless, before focusing on the value of popular music consumption specifically, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of these broader debates, beginning with mainstream economic approaches.

In neo-classical economics, value is generally understood as the net addition to overall wellbeing caused by usage of a good (Allan *et al* 2013: 5). While this encompasses a broader conception of value than simple exchange value (market price), neo-classical economists tend to adopt a utilitarian perspective that focuses on individuals' utility (wellbeing), couched in terms of the satisfaction of their individual preferences. According to Allan *et al*, 'value, in this context, *derives* from the subjective preferences which individuals have over the goods and services they consume' (*ibid.*:9, emphasis added), with individual preferences assumed to reflect the value that individuals place upon the consumption of specific goods. Neo-classical economists thus infer the value of a specific good by observing the behavioural choices

individuals make, which are assumed to reveal their preferences. It is argued that the amount an individual is willing to pay to use a particular good or service is an accurate expression of how much they value that item. 'Willingness to pay' is not necessarily the same as exchange value/market price because it is possible that an individual is willing to pay more than the market price (with the 'bonus' value being labelled 'consumer surplus') but, if a market is in equilibrium, market price is assumed to be a good proxy for how much individuals value something. This results in what Hutter and Frey criticise as a 'strong consensus among economists that exchange value exhausts the meaning of the notion of value' (2010:37).

The value of culture poses challenges for simple neo-classical conceptualisations of value, however. For one thing, culture functions as what is known as a 'public good', which means that it is 'non-rivalrous' (one individual consuming a song does not prevent another individual from consuming it as well) and 'non-excludable' (it is hard to prevent individuals who have not paid for it from using it). This means that 'in general, public goods suffer from under-provision since each consumer can free-ride off others, resulting in the market value of such a good being less than the combined value to all consumers' (Allan *et al*, 2013:5-6). However, some public good effects are ameliorated by a second complication, which is that much culture is produced within 'dual markets' (Doyle, 2010:247), with media industries creating media content not merely (sometimes not even) to be sold to consumers but also to generate audience attention (and, latterly, audience data) which can be packaged and sold to advertisers. Relatedly, in the recorded music industry, exploitation of the Intellectual Property Rights of a recording are often more lucrative than sales to consumers. Thirdly, and perhaps the most significant complication for neo-classical understandings of value, is that much of 'culture' exists outside of the immediate sphere of market relations (people do not necessarily pay an entrance fee to visit a museum or a heritage site, for example). In such circumstances, there is thus no price which can act as a proxy for social value.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the challenges that culture poses to neo-classical interpretations of value a sub-discipline of 'cultural economics' has emerged. The most influential author in this area is David Throsby. Throsby argues for the existence of something called 'cultural value' which is distinct from economic value. While Throsby argues that cultural value is often reflected in economic value because 'in general the more highly people value things for cultural reasons the more they will be willing to pay for them', he also acknowledges that 'there are some aspects of cultural value that cannot realistically be rendered in monetary terms' (2006:42). Throsby breaks down cultural value into constituent elements, including aesthetic value, spiritual value, social value, historical value, symbolic value and authenticity value (2001:28-9). However, although Throsby's framework seems to allow greater recognition of non-economic dimensions of value, ultimately Throsby is still an economist and his modelling is still for the purpose of measuring/quantifying value. As Klammer argues, once

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<sup>2</sup> Economists have developed theoretical models to *infer* the level of value that individuals place upon non-market items and experiences, either through preferences revealed by behaviour in related markets, or through 'stated preference' surveys in which individuals are asked to respond to hypothetical market situations. Their veracity is a source of dispute among economists (Allan *et al*, 2013).

Throsby has identified the various components of cultural value, he 'subsequently treats those values as given, as inputs in an economic valuation process' (in Carnforth & Brown, 2014:40). This is in keeping with the convention in mainstream economics to assume the capacity to attach economic values to non-economic processes. This disciplinary consensus is one reason why, as O'Brien reports, many economists are sceptical of Throsby's conceptualisation of cultural value, instead reiterating that 'the value people gain from culture, whether aesthetic, spiritual, symbolic or historical is [already] reflected in culture's economic value' (2010: 20).

Economists may exert the greatest policy influence in categorising value, but they do not hold a monopoly on ideas about it. There is, of course, a long history of philosophical investigation that has addressed the 'intrinsic' aesthetic value of culture more generally, as well as music specifically. Such work has often treated music as an abstract entity and sought to establish a set of principles against which the value of music could be judged. Nineteenth century aestheticism in particular presented 'art' as an entirely autonomous system of values, unimpeded by other framings of value such as morality or commerce. Indeed, commercial value was often held as inimical to artistic value, with meeting the needs of one presented as necessarily undermining the values of the other. The assumed antagonism between artistic and commercial value has formed the basis of many critiques of popular music, from both the left and the right.

While calls to inherent value or aesthetic autonomy are generally rejected by contemporary scholars of popular music (though see Stone, 2016), there are many examples of authors arguing that popular music is important and valuable without recourse to economic value. For example, Kassabian states that music 'modulates our attentional capacities, it tunes our affective relationships to categories of identity, [and] conditions our participation in fields of subjectivity' (2013:18) while Hesmondhalgh, in a detailed exposition of the value of music, argues that 'music matters because it has the potential to enrich people's lives, and enrich societies... [It both] feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self... [and] is often the basis of collective, public experiences' (2013:1-2). In cases such as these, the authors are elucidating what they see as the valuable social functions that popular music can serve, at both an individual and a collective level, with little or no regard to questions of economic value. Indeed, elsewhere Hesmondhalgh criticises neo-classical approaches to cultural value, arguing that in assuming the moral neutrality of the market mechanism and concentrating on formal rather than substantive notions of well-being, approaches that define value in terms of consumer preferences distort the real value of cultural products, which lies in their potential to contribute to human flourishing (2017:209).

Perhaps the most intensive critique of the idea that cultural value can be captured in economic value has been in the field of cultural policy. Recent work in this area, especially in the UK, has been critical of the 'instrumentalist' turn in cultural policy, whereby government agencies seek to quantify the benefits of cultural activity in economic terms in order to determine policy decisions. As a result there has been 'a resurgence of attention to how the arts and culture are *experienced*... with a view to re-evaluating the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value' (Kaszynska 2015:261, emphasis added). Much of the recent

AHRC *Cultural Value* research programme consisted of projects that sought to elucidate the intrinsic value of culture/cultural engagement without recourse to economic instrumentalism (AHRC, 2016). One such project, by Behr and his colleagues (2016), investigated the cultural value of live music. They argued for 'a shift of emphasis towards the experiences of participants, away from a conception of 'value' as an abstract good contained within live music... rather than trying to quantify intrinsic value, it may be more fruitful to seek to understand how various actors perceive it' (408). Their approach is consistent with Hewison's critique of instrumentalist approaches to cultural value in which he argues that 'intrinsic value has to be articulated, not measured' (2006, in O'Brien, 2010:41).

There thus exists a range of ways of understanding the value of popular music that downplay or even negate economic value as a relevant factor, some of which have been developed in response to what has been perceived as an over-emphasis on economic value in other approaches. Culture, it is argued, operates on a different plane and is valuable on its own, non-economic, terms. As Behr *et al* argue, 'value for money decisions do not necessarily apply to a live music experience in ways they might to other commodities... our respondents were clear that they went to music [events] to forget about monetary concerns and to have a transcendent experience' (2016:414-6).

### **Evaluating the economic value of recorded music**

It would be brave to argue that the value of popular music is exhausted by its economic value. There are many ways in which popular music can be valuable to individuals, or fulfil socially valuable functions which seem, at best, tangentially related to market forces. However, despite their virtues, it seems to me that accounts critiquing an over-emphasis upon economic value risk throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Economic value may not tell us everything about socio-cultural value but that does not mean it tells us nothing. For one thing, one does not have to subscribe to an unwavering belief in *homo economicus* to recognise that people *do* make routine calculations about whether things are 'worth it' or not. The concert-goers in Behr *et al*'s study may have attended music events to 'forget about monetary concerns' but that does not mean they did not make an implicit judgement about whether the ticket price was 'worth it' prior to actually buying it (2016:411). Controversies about ticket prices indicate that people do have some sense of the 'fair' value of a concert. Secondly, we need to acknowledge that popular music is a commercial cultural form. It may not be 'commercial' in the way that the production of chicken nuggets is commercial but it is not non-commercial either: the whole field is full of small time musicians and entrepreneurs seeking to gain an audience and sell things (records, tickets, merchandise) to them. Unlike some other forms of music, popular music receives little or no state subsidy and relies upon the market to survive.<sup>3</sup> As such, ideas about non-economic cultural value derived from museums or heritage sites are not wholly analogous

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<sup>3</sup> This is actually changing a little in the twenty-first century, especially in areas relating to cultural heritage. It is perhaps also worth acknowledging the way that the music industry, especially the recording industry, seeks state support with regard to legislative protection of its markets (lobbying for blank tape levies, copyright extensions and so forth).

and it seems counter-intuitive to suggest that the economic value of popular music does not in some ways reflect how people perceive its socio-cultural value.

To be clear, I am absolutely not proposing an uncritical adoption of neo-classical perspectives on price and value. Among other shortcomings, economic approaches lack a sophisticated awareness of the nuances of popular music culture. It is limiting to conceive of wellbeing solely in terms of the satisfaction of individual preferences, and only of those individual preferences that can be accommodated by the market. It is problematic to assume that individuals are always consciously aware of their preferences. Nonetheless, I would argue that there are grounds to cautiously assume *at least some* connection between the socio-cultural and economic value of a commercial cultural form like popular music. Economic value may not be a precise measure of cultural value but it probably does act as a kind of barometer of it. At the very least, fluctuating economic value should give us pause to consider the socio-cultural values that are being captured or not captured by the new economic reality.

With those provisos in mind, let us offer a quick summary of what has happened to the economic value of recorded music in the last twenty years or so. It is undoubtedly the case that the *price* of recorded popular music has fallen noticeably: from a high of \$18.99 for a CD album in the late-1990s (Kot, 2009:45), albums (physical and digital) are now approximately two thirds of that while streaming services offer 'all-you-can-eat' options for \$9.99 per month. It is also true that people are buying less recorded music than in the past: according to IFPI data, the number of album equivalent units sold in the US fell from 1.05 billion in 1996 (1999:10) to 485.8 million in 2011 (2016:72).<sup>4</sup> The overall result has been a considerable decline in the total economic value of recorded music since 1999, though some of that decline has recently been reversed.<sup>5</sup>

If we assumed a strong relationship between cultural value and economic value, the decline in the latter may lead us to conclude that the socio-cultural value of recorded popular music has declined in recent years: collectively, people do not value it as much as they once did, either in absolute terms or relative to other things they on which they could spend their money. That would certainly be a neo-classical conclusion:

At the equilibrium condition for the consumer it is posited that the marginal utility per dollar spent on recorded music would have to equal the marginal utility per dollar spent on...other goods. As the price of recorded music has indeed fallen against other

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<sup>4</sup> 'Album equivalence' counted three singles as one album in 1996 and ten downloads as one album in 2011. The latter date has been chosen because it coincides with Spotify's US launch (unit sales have since fallen further but some of that decline has been offset by streaming). The data used here is US specific: though the specificities of different territories should be recognised, it is indicative of general trends.

<sup>5</sup> The overall economic value calculated by the IFPI includes consumer sales/subscriptions and income generated through business-to-business licensing. An important point to note here is that the 'official' economic value is collected by music industry organisations such as the IFPI and UKMusic. As such, its veracity cannot simply be assumed and the role it plays as a rhetorical device cannot be ignored (for example, it may have been in the industry's interests to over-emphasise the rate of decline in sales revenue when it was lobbying for new anti-piracy initiatives and enforcement).



goods, the inevitable implication is that the ratio of music's marginal utility to other goods is adjusting downwards (Alhadeff 2006:2).

Some might argue for an alternative position that the socio-cultural value of music has not changed over time but that, as a result of some kind of 'market failure', prices were actually too high in the past and the market is now reverting to equilibrium. Given there was widespread disquiet about the prices of records in the 1980s and 1990s (discussed below), such an argument may well get instinctive approval from many music consumers. I will not pursue this line of thinking here, partly because this is not a historical paper on the recording industry and partly because it does not actually undermine the neo-classical perspective outlined above. From a neo-classical approach, whatever the potential failures of the recorded music market, if a consumer was willing to pay, say, £18 for a CD then they have decided that the CD has at least that much socio-cultural value to them. Obviously, some consumers would not pay that much but, for the millions who did, economic and socio-cultural value remained in broad equilibrium.

Instead, I will concentrate on a different kind of market failure argument – the one being made by the record industry and many musicians, and consistent with economic theories about public goods – which is that recorded popular music is just as valued as it was in the past (maybe even more so) but that extrinsic factors are preventing the socio-cultural value from being realised in its economic value. These extrinsic factors are often understood as being changing technologies and unscrupulous technology companies: it is argued that new digital technologies, initially MP3 and P2P and now streaming sites and services, have made people reluctant to spend money on recorded music given that they could access it for free via other channels.

While changing digital technologies are undoubtedly influential, there are at least two weaknesses in accepting them as the main explanation for the drop in recorded music's economic value. Firstly, arguments about piracy in particular rely upon uncritical assumptions regarding the rational economic behaviour of music consumers. While the idea that individuals will switch to the lower priced (or free) equivalent of a desired item is instinctively easy to understand, reality is more complicated. Piracy is not a simple substitute for authorised products; if it was, then, given how much pirated music circulated, we could expect the value of the legitimated record industry to have decreased by significantly more than it actually did. Piracy is a form of musical consumption that intertwines with, rather than simply displacing, other forms of musical consumption. Furthermore, the recent success of music streaming services have demonstrated that many consumers *are* willing to pay something for music that they could alternatively access for free. A simple means/end analysis is insufficient for making sense of people's music consumption practices.

The second weakness is that the claim ignores empirical evidence about the commercial value of recorded music from before digitisation occurred. For one thing, there was already disquiet about the price of recorded music being too high well before the emergence of MP3, in both the policy sphere (there were investigations into the price of records by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in the UK in 1994 and the Federal Trade Commission

in the US in 2000) and in journalism and fan discussion (e.g. Strauss, 1995; BBC 1998). It is clear that, prior to digitisation shaking up the industry, a significant number of consumers felt that the economic value of recorded music exceeded its socio-cultural value.

Furthermore, the economic value of recorded music was already beginning to drop prior to digitisation, both in terms of the global value of recorded music, which peaked in 1995 (IFPI 1999:5) but also in terms of the price of individual music commodities: Alhadeff provides a price index for recorded music products in the US going back 1990 which 'shows that, in real terms, music prices had been dropping significantly and continuously well before internet piracy became rampant' (2006:3).

Overall, suggesting digitisation as the causal factor overemphasises the technological at the expense of the social. Responses to the digitisation of music were not inevitable. Other possible futures were open: if, collectively and individually, there was a strong valorisation of music and/or concern about the wellbeing of its creators, there were channels available through which people could have demonstrated those sentiments through 'willingness to pay'. This did not happen. Digitisation *per se* cannot be the explanatory factor for the declining economic value of recorded music. Instead we need to look more closely at the social relations of musical consumption into which digitisation emerged. Perhaps digitisation merely revealed underlying sociological phenomena that imply that music is less valued by most individuals than has often been assumed. This is the position I wish to pursue in the remainder of the paper.

### **The socio-cultural value of recorded music**

In this section I want to offer two hypotheses about the ways in which recorded music is and was used socially. The first concerns music as object and relates to the social functions played by records, mainly in the past. The second concerns music as sound and concentrates on the manner in which most music is heard, which is primarily as background sound. Both are speculative: it is difficult to offer concrete data to fully support either position given the nature of what is being suggested. Existing research on popular music tends to focus on subjects with an identifiable interest in music; there is much less work on mundane/ordinary experiences of music, or on the experiences of those to whom music holds little interest. Nonetheless, I do think that these ideas provide useful framing devices for considering the ways in which many individuals, perhaps the majority of people, use(d) and relate(d) to music. In different ways, both ideas suggest that 'music' may not be valued by individuals as highly as might sometimes be assumed and, while neither rely on 'digitisation' as the causal agent, both offer potential explanations for why the economic value of recorded music may have declined since the emergence of digitisation.

#### ***Music as object***

When people bought records in the past, what exactly were they buying, and why?<sup>6</sup> Note this is not a question about why people may buy physical music carriers in the digital era

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<sup>6</sup> In this section I am using 'records' to mean all physical music carriers (LPs, CDs, cassettes and so on).

(e.g. the 'vinyl revival') but about mundane music purchasing before online music: why did people buy records? The obvious answer would seem to be that they were buying a specific piece of music or, at least, the ability to play that music. However, for a couple of reasons, I am not sure that things are so straightforward.

The first reason concerns price. For the majority of the pre-digital era, newly released records pretty much cost the same.<sup>7</sup> Different 'tiers' existed (e.g. new releases and budget) but, generally speaking, there was little or no difference in the prices of new albums (a trend that has continued into the digital download and streaming eras). Suppliers in the recorded music market do not compete on price: the price of an individual album bore/bears no relationship either to the costs of producing that album or to the expected demand for it (Elberse 2010:109). This is in contrast to the live music sector, for example, where ticket prices did, and do, vary according to the popularity of the act and the cost of putting on the show.

'Uniform pricing' is something of a puzzle in conventional economics as it rarely enables producers to achieve the greatest possible revenue for their products (because some consumers are willing to pay higher prices for the product as they value it more highly but that 'surplus' utility goes to the consumer rather than the producer), though there are industrial explanations for why it exists within cultural industries such as film and recorded music (Sprigman 2006, Richardson and Stähler 2016). My interest here, however, is not on why it occurs but, rather, on the potential impact of uniform pricing upon consumers' understandings of value. Uniform pricing eliminates consideration of either aesthetics or popularity from the price of a record: a record by The Beatles cost the same as a record by Herman's Hermits which cost the same as one by a no-name artist that only ever reached the lower end of the top forty. There is no sense in which consumers are being told 'The Beatles are the best and therefore their records cost more'. It is as if the bands/albums are being presented as interchangeable.<sup>8</sup> Uniform pricing tells the consumer 'this is what *a record* costs' rather than 'this is what *a specific record by a specific artist* costs'. The logical inference to draw from this is that the price of a record is the price of the standardised object and not the price of an individualised piece of music. Consumers are paying for the record itself: the perceived value (in this argument demonstrated by price) is in the object, not the music.

Of course, it is possible to argue that while consumers did associate value with the record object, the object is simply a means to an end – people were actually buying music and the record was the only way in which they could so do. However, this leads to the second reason why I am unsure that people bought records 'to play music': it is possible that, once purchased, an average individual record was played very few times, in many cases not at all.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Though greater variation did begin to emerge in the 1990s when 'big box' retailers like Walmart starting to sell CDs as a loss-leader.

<sup>8</sup> In the early years of the classical music industry there was some price differentiation according to aesthetic standards: the Gramophone company offered different coloured labels that reflected both the status of the artist in question and the exclusive price (Tschmuck 2001:37).

<sup>9</sup> Two provisos should be added here: firstly, it is probably truer for albums rather than singles - it is plausible that singles were played more intensively for a short period of time; secondly, this has probably changed over time – when records were relatively more expensive they were probably played more frequently.

For obvious reasons, definitive data on the post-purchase life of records is impossible to generate, so what is offered here is a collection of anecdotal evidence intended to build up a picture that suggests that this idea is at least worth pursuing: in 1989, singer Peter Gabriel said in an interview 'I read this scary statistic from America that the average album is played 1.2 times' (Sutcliffe 1989:75-76); in different though related cultural forms, a consumer survey in 2014 suggested that over half of books owned in British households have not been read (Copping 2014) while a 'studio home entertainment president' reported to Fritz that, in the early 2000s, 15% of DVDs purchased were never even removed from their shrink-wrap (2018: 17); and, while recognising that digitisation fundamentally changes the nature of what is being discussed, a survey of iTunes music libraries suggested that 81% of tracks have never been played (ie had a zero play count) (CMU 2011) while a 2016 poll suggested that 48% of people who buy vinyl in the digital age do not actually play them (Savage 2016).

Such information should at least give us pause to consider whether the bulk of the value of a record to its buyer may actually have lay in functions *other* than its ability to play music. If someone buys a record that in all likelihood they only end up playing a handful of times, what factors other than 'to listen to the music' could be involved in the purchasing of that record? To begin with, existing research on consumption and collecting clearly demonstrates that the very act of buying creates positive emotions (eg Belk 1988), so it is certainly worth considering how much of a record's value comes from the act of buying it and owning it rather than playing it. This is especially so given that records are objects laden with symbolic value, radiating signals about music, genres, specific artists and so on that in turn radiate information about an individual's taste, status, age, group affiliation, personal identity and so on. To buy a record, to carry it under one's arm, to display it in the home is a way of saying – to oneself and others – 'I am a Michael Jackson fan' or 'I am the kind of person that buys jazz records'. But it is the object that is performing the symbolic work here, not 'the music' – it is entirely possible to demonstrate 'I am the kind of person that likes Cuban music' without ever actually playing the CD. Records emanate meaning far more than they emanate music. The fact that records can emanate music is, of course, an essential reason why they emanate meaning, but it is not a feature that has to be instantiated very much – if at all – for the object to be socially meaningful and valuable. Indeed, the rich symbolic nature of records is one reason why records were popular as gifts – gifts accounted for roughly one third of records bought in the UK, for example.<sup>10</sup> That so many records were bought as gifts also reinforces the suggestion that many records were not bought 'to listen to the music' (and, maybe, helps explain why many of them were not played very much).

To summarise the argument I am trying to make here: the record is, or maybe was, a highly symbolic object that fulfils a variety of social purposes. One of those purposes may have been 'to play music' but only one, and probably a much less important one than commonly assumed. Instead, I would suggest that the (silent) record object itself fulfils the most

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<sup>10</sup> The BPI reported in 1991 that 40% of record sales were in the Christmas quarter while, in 2013, gifts accounted for one third of UK spending on physical records (BPI 1991, 2014).

common social functions of a record, and the ones that were most commonly *valued* by individuals, even if only implicitly (because, otherwise, why would people buy records that, in all likelihood, they are rarely going to play?).

If we look at discussions about record pricing when digital albums first emerged, there is some evidence to support the idea that consumers saw the value of a record as being in the object rather than the music. Even though it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of record production (where the costs are in the production of the music rather than the object), it was widely held that digital albums should cost considerably less than their physical equivalents (e.g. BBC 2005). Asked what they thought digital albums should cost, consumers suggested a value of less than half of the physical album (Ipsos 2003), and often dramatically less, such as the consumer quoted by Styvén (2007:60) arguing that ‘I object to being asked to pay almost £1 per track for a download. ...the record companies [are] still profiteering. Downloads should be 10p each at most’. When framed in terms of ‘willingness to pay’, a survey by Buxmann *et al* found that 29.7% of consumers were only willing to pay under ten cents for a download, with a further 28% willing to pay between ten and fifty cents (2007:34). It seems clear that consumers understood the most valuable part of the item as the CD itself and, stripped of its object, many individuals seem to interpret ‘music itself’ as a fairly low-value item.

My argument here owes something to Antoine Hennion’s work on ‘mediations’ (1997, 2001). Hennion argues that unlike sculpture, for example, ‘music’ does not exist as an abstract, autonomous, entity but can only be said to exist through specific ‘mediations’ such as scores, instruments and records. Following this line of thought we might therefore argue that ‘music’ is inherently valueless outside of its specific mediations: it requires a specific mediation to be brought into being and to have socio-cultural value. The ‘value’ itself thus resides in the mediation rather than ‘the music’.<sup>11</sup> Conceiving of music as inherently valueless outside of its specific mediations may help explain why the overall economic value of recorded music should have dropped since the onset of digitisation. If the value of a record lay in its object-ness rather than its music-ness, then much of that value has disappeared. While digitisation does not involve a complete dematerialisation of musical commodities (Morris 2015), it seems clear that, to this point, recorded music’s new mediations have not generated affordances that consumers find as valuable as those that were offered by material music carriers. It can also be a useful framework for understanding music streaming services. In services like Spotify the ‘commodity’ that a subscriber pays for is not the music itself but, rather, access to music. Like with much of the internet, where ‘culture’ has been transformed into ‘content’, the economic value of individual pieces of music is negligible. The value that people are willing to pay for lies in the digital mediations – access, curatorial platforms and devices.

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<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, Taylor – writing about the commodification of music rather than Hennion’s more general theory of mediations – posits the existence of an abstract ‘music’ that can have value even though the commodification of music is ‘utterly dependent’ upon the production of objects through which music can be reproduced (2007:283). He argues that the musical commodity ‘subsists’ within the separate material commodity (301).

## **Music as sound**

If music is inherently valueless and only becomes valued through specific mediations, then any value music may have is context-dependent, relying upon the social value afforded by those mediations. As such, I want to shift focus to the contexts in which music is heard for this too, in my view, suggests that music may not be as valued as much as might be assumed.

While musicological accounts often assume an idealised mode of attentive listening in which the listener is entirely focused on the music being heard (a mode still visibly reproduced in the classical concert hall, for example), we know that this focused mode of listening is highly unusual in contemporary society. Indeed, Sloboda *et al* suggest from their research that listening to music as a focused activity accounts for just 2% of all kinds of music listening (2001:18), a figure replicated in a study by Greasley and Lamont (2011:55). Instead, there are a range of studies which demonstrate that, in the vast majority of cases in which music is heard, music is *not* the central focus of attention. Listening to music is most often a complementary activity – people put on music in the background while they are doing something else such as exercising, housework and socialising. Anahid Kassabian has discussed this at length in her book *Ubiquitous Listening* (2013). She reports that ‘most of my students...say they’re most often not paying attention to the music [they are playing]; they just want it as a background accompaniment to their routines and activities’ (2013:xii).<sup>12</sup> Kassabian theorises that these people, along with the majority of the population in the Western world, are engaged in ‘a mode of listening dissociated from specific generic characteristics of the music’, which she characterises as ‘ubiquitous listening’ (*ibid.*:9).

The way that this inattentive mode of listening has come to dominate virtually all music reception is reflected in the evolution of music streaming services, especially Spotify. In the company’s early years, Spotify emphasised ‘the music itself’ in its self-presentation, offering itself as a giant catalogue of songs from which users could access anything they desired. From 2013, however, the company switched to a new strategy, emphasising music’s primary role as accompaniment to other activities, prioritising curation of the catalogue and launching a new slogan, ‘the right music for every moment’ (Fleischer and Snickars 2017:139). Spotify’s emphasis on the regulation of mood and affect has been criticised by Pelly (2017), who argues that ‘its ambition [is] to turn all music into emotional wallpaper... “Piano in the Background” is one of the most aptly titled [playlists]; “in the background” could be added to the [name of the] majority of Spotify playlists’.

Spotify’s pursuit of ‘lean back listening’ has further implications which may further undermine the value perceived by listeners of specific pieces of music. Playlists are emerging as the main way in which musical consumption is experienced on Spotify. However, these playlists are increasingly defined by non-musical factors such as mood or the activity which the music will accompany and not the music itself. Reinforcing Kassabian’s point above, in 2015 Spotify founder Daniel Ek stated that ‘people don’t look at things like hip-hop or

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<sup>12</sup> It might also be noted that Kassabian would likely have been teaching music students, who one might expect to be more attentive to music than the general population.

country anymore – they are looking at things based on events and activities’ (in Hu 2017). It seems that many people just want to have ‘some music’ on in the background, and do not necessarily desire to listen to specific pieces which means that signifiers like artist, album and genre are becoming less significant. This may reflect a change from earlier eras, in which songs were often valorised through their social origins as much as their sounds: whereas ideas about, for example, performers or localities used to be important in shaping responses to particular pieces of music, the rise of playlists strips away much of that contextual information. The lack of liner note information in digital music is one illustration of how pieces of music are becoming ‘sourceless’, alienated from their social origins. While not writing about playlists specifically, this sourcelessness is suggested by Kassabian as a key characteristic of ubiquitous listening:

Whereas we are accustomed to thinking of most musics, and most cultural products, in terms of authorship and location, this music comes from the plants and the walls and, potentially, our clothes. It comes from everywhere and nowhere. Its projection looks to erase its production as much as possible, posing instead as a quality of the environment (2013:9-10).

Ubiquitous music is thus music whose origins are disguised, becoming part of the environment, reducing the ways in which we can tie it to conventional musical frameworks. And though contemporary streaming services may be different from earlier forms of Muzak, the outcomes could be quite similar. Individualised items of music are being replaced by a constant stream of sounds. Surveying teenagers’ music use, Mulligan states that music consumption is shifting:

not just away from albums but from artist centric experiences. With so much new music being released every day and that content being pushed into curated playlists, music fans simply don’t have the time or the need to dive into album listening sessions. ... it is clear that music consumption for teens is mirroring that of their overall digital experiences. Music is becoming increasingly like the torrent of continually updated and essentially transient content that fills their social feeds. (2017:19)

Music being used mainly as background or accompaniment to other activity does not make it unimportant. Indeed, given music’s power to influence moods and emotions, it may make it very important and Kassabian argues that the mode of listening consciousness it engenders has ‘profound implications’ for a range of issues relating to personal identity and politics (2013:18). Nor would I want to imply that this is the only way that people experience music, even those considered ‘non-active’ music listeners. Even people who don’t care about music very much, or whose listening experiences are dominated by the ubiquitous mode, can have intense musical experiences, or other intense experiences heightened by music. However, it is undeniably true that the large majority of these musical experiences tend to be of low intensity, mostly unmemorable and short-lived (Sloboda 2010 in Hesmondhalgh 2013:14). They are, in Hesmondhalgh’s words, ‘hardly *aesthetic* experiences at all’ (ibid., emphasis in original). As such, the idea of ubiquitous listening can

contribute to an explanation as to why many *individuals* may not view music as particularly *valuable*, especially that, by definition, this kind of musical experience exists on the periphery of an individual's consciousness. This point is important given that neo-classical approaches to value rely upon individuals being consciously aware of their own preferences. It is not difficult to see why peripheral awareness of low-intensity musical experience may result in most people thinking that music is not worth paying for, or at least not paying much for. For most individuals, the free tier of a service like Spotify more than meets their needs, in much the same way that listening to the radio met the needs of the majority of the population in the past (and still does; radio remains a dominant way in which large swathes of the population access music, though this is segmented by age). For these consumers, even a moderate price of \$9.99 per month is not 'worth it' and, contrary to arguments made by artists like Taylor Swift, removing free alternatives would not alter their perspective. Music on its own just isn't sufficiently important to spend money on given its main role as a 'support act' to other activities.<sup>13</sup> Overall, in much the same way as described in the previous section, it is possible that new digital technologies have simply revealed some of the underlying social dynamics of music listening rather than causing any kind of cultural devaluation.

## Conclusion

In the context of public debates about the value of music prompted by its declining economic value, this paper has explored recorded music's socio-cultural value. Without adopting a neo-classical position that assumes value can be entirely captured in a price, I have nonetheless argued that the reduced economic value of recorded music does perhaps reveal something about how it is valued socially. The main argument of the paper has been to suggest that (recorded) music may not be as highly valued as is often assumed. Overall, I think there is often a tendency among those most invested in music to imagine that everyone experiences music with similar intensity but that is not the case. To be clear, there are still people to whom music means very much and who value music very dearly. This paper does not seek to diminish their experience but does suggest that they are the minority cases. For the majority of people, at least of those in the Western world, while music may have some social value, such value is actually fairly low-level, tied to music's main social functions as background and/or accompaniment to routine activities. While recorded music *objects* have offered social functions in the past that resulted in them being more highly valued, such affordances have been reduced by new, digital, mediations. In this way, digitisation might be revealing more long-standing sociological trends in musical consumption rather than causing a devaluation of music *per se*.

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically, it is not necessarily these consumers whose habits have hit the recording industry hardest as, in all likelihood, they probably did not spend a lot of money on music anyway (though note the earlier comment on just how much was spent on music objects as gifts). More significant in terms of overall economic downturn are those listeners who value music very highly. In the past they would have spent a lot of money on music which can now (in some ways) be substituted by a 9.99 monthly subscription. The industry seeks to keep these listeners spending by releasing increasingly expensive super-deluxe box sets, reinforcing once again that it is often the record-object that is the locus of value.



There is no space in this paper to elaborate fully what my argument would mean for an analysis of the music industry but I will note a few comments here that could be developed elsewhere. The first concerns the price point for streaming services. As mentioned above, the standard 9.99 per month is 'not worth it' for many individuals for whom music may be a pleasant but low-engagement/low-intensity experience. At what price point would they demonstrate 'willingness to pay': 3.99? 2.99? Lower? If it pushed lower, then labels and musicians will lose 'consumer surplus' to those willing to pay more and debates about the devaluation of music will intensify. Secondly, we need to pay attention to continuities in music consumption as much as the changes. There is often an assumption that, pre-digitisation, the majority of people 'appreciated' music through purchasing it, but that was never the case. It is important to recognise that most listeners have always got their music for free – through radio, television, jukeboxes, public broadcasts and so on. This leads to my third point; that the system of rights exploitation in the recorded music industry, in which entertainment venues must pay to play music publicly, or media producers must pay to include music in their films, advertisements and so on, in many ways is a good reflection of the way in which most people relate to music – as a 'value added' component of something else rather than a source of value in its own right. This is why 'business to business' revenue has always been important to the record industry and why its importance is increasing as income from record sales/subscriptions has declined. The current 'value gap' dispute between the labels and YouTube is about precisely this issue, with rights-holders arguing that YouTube's services (and thus its advertising revenue) are enhanced by the availability of music but that this added value is insufficiently recognised in the amount of money YouTube pays rights-holders. Finally, there are also theoretical questions to pursue regarding the role that recordings play now in the new, digitised, popular music ecosystem. Despite becoming even more of a 'public good', popular music recordings have experienced an unimaginable oversupply: what effect does that have on popular music culture and economics? Do recordings still exist as commodities in their own right, or are they now merely advertisements for other commodities (concert tickets, T-shirts)? For decades, the recording was the cultural *and* economic centre of the popular music industry; it is unclear whether that remains the case and in what ways, or whether it has lost either or both of those central positions.

The arguments made in this paper are intended to provoke discussion rather than to act as definitive statements. Finding conclusive empirical evidence to support some of the historical arguments may be impossible. More than anything, however, it is intended as a call for more empirical work to fully investigate popular music consumption, especially 'ordinary' and 'mundane' music consumption. The majority of research on popular music consumption from within a sociology of popular music/popular music studies perspective tends to be on subjects for whom music *does* hold value, often quite a lot of value – fans and subcultures. Even work from a 'music in everyday life' perspective tends to concentrate on people who cultivate an active relationship with music (e.g. DeNora 2000). There is nothing wrong with these objects of study but they also represent a small minority of musical consumers and musical experiences. As it stands, large swathes of musical consumption are being

overlooked by the subfield that supposedly specialises in popular music. Work on ordinary music consumption is more common within the psychology of music but such work often emphasises quantitative evaluations of musical episodes and lacks the understanding of the cultural nuances of popular music that sociological accounts can provide. What is needed is more qualitative work on ordinary musical consumption – whether, how and in what ways people use and value music – framed by the insights generated from existing studies of popular music consumption. In focusing on something that often exists on the periphery of consciousness, such research poses methodological challenges, but it is essential if we are going to fully understand the value that popular music has for the majority of people.

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