

Music in Print, How Publishing Has Been Able to Flirt With Music

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Abstract

Creating a publication about music has always been challenging, as the discussed matter couldn't be visually represented in the printed page in its own listenable form. Nevertheless independent printed media has experimented with DIY inventive strategies to include sounds at various levels in traditional publications through different formats than its standards (classic records or CDs). This integration goes beyond the 'multiple media' approach, as affects either publishing as a practice, and print as a medium, creating a symbiosis which can lead to different grades of interaction.

Sound Was Meant to Kill Print (After It Killed Voice)

Historically sound has been one of the first media to plainly rival print. We can even trace it back as sound, in form of voice, has been used as a medium to first transmit information in time and space in what has been defined as "oral culture", before any type of written or physical medium, thus of print. Oral culture was based on the transmission of knowledge through spoken word, using the collective, and personal, memory as storage space, which sometimes returned slight different versions, in a slowly evolving narrative. Initially writing, with its accuracy and stability in time, and then especially print, providing cheap and massive duplication qualities, have given a much powerful alternative to oral tradition, finally almost supplanting it. In this respect Marshall McLuhan affirmed later: "we have spent much energy and fury in recent centuries in destroying oral culture by print technology".[1]

One of the first visions of how print would have faced a changed mediascape, in some respect uniquely futuristic, was elaborated by Octave Uzanne and Albert Robida in their illustrated story *La fin des livres*, originally published in France in 1894 in the collection *Contes pour les bibliophiles*. [2] Uzanne elaborated on of a future world of publishing which would no longer have relied on the 'static' printed page, delivering instead all content through voice, both live and recorded, using a platform which nowadays would best be described as 'on demand'. But they were not talking about radio, wireless transmission had yet to be developed and popularised, neither they were describing any kind of telephone broadcasting, or, as we would say in contemporary

terms, 'cable radio', since it relied on live-through-wires content as well as playback of recorded content, which we would now refer to as online and offline content, distributed through the then-popular and fragile cylinder recording medium. Robida's illustrations depicted this future world in a very imaginative and effective manner, while maintaining the distinctive graphic style of the period, essential and descriptive. The future seemed to be one with electric wires everywhere, spreading the content of huge audio libraries into every home as well as in public spaces.

Moreover Uzanne argued that reading causes fatigue and apathy. Words heard through the 'tube', on the other hand, would convey energy, and thus reinforcing the concept that the gramophone, specifically, must inevitably supplant the printed page. The way in which Uzanne imagined this future scenario, anticipates several contemporary issues regarding the distribution of immaterial content. He thought that watchmakers, for example, will have designed reliable miniaturised gramophones (= iPods); the required mobile electricity (still an issue in the 21st century) is generated by harnessing the user's physical movements (one of many contemporary green test strategies for producing clean energy). The libraries would have become "phonographotèques" (= podcast repositories), while bibliophiles are now known as "phonographophiles" (= download addicts). Furthermore, in Uzanne's vision, the author becomes his own publisher (= vanity publishing coupled with customised print on demand), living off the royalties of his own works (= eventually crowdsourcing). Finally, city squares and crossroads would have featured kiosks where people can insert a coin in order to listen to works of literature (= digital kiosks, online micro-economies) through simple headphones which would have been so cheap that even the poor could have afforded them. One of the most retro-futuristic inventions is a kind of mobile device, filled with recordings of the author's works, which he can carry with him through the streets. Using multiple wire connections, spreading from the device, a small neighbourhood can be 'provided' with his audio content. And speaking of voice replacing paper, historically, even Thomas Alva Edison, attempting to envision a practical use for his early experiments in recording on cylinders, saw them as a 'paper-reducing,' as opposed to 'paper-

replacing' medium. The cylinders, wrapped in their thin aluminium foils, would contain spoken letters and memos to be shipped to their recipients, thus reducing

Sound on Paper Media

Print and sound have often had an idiosyncratic relationship. A text which describes and analyses music is inherently talking about a quite ephemeral topic, which can eventually be only imagined and represented in the mind of the reader. So publications about music have a quite specific role: describing and verbally narrating something which can't be easily represented in the flat space of the printed page, but has to be omnipresent there. The writing, its style and content is obviously independent from the music representation, being subjective, but the "reading experience" and the whole understanding can eventually be improved through a better representation. This tension between the discourse about the sounds and the sounds themselves, is what researcher Rachel O'Dwyer calls "synaesthetic quality of writing about music."[4] This has led to finding ways to integrate music in paper in a 'recorded' or 'encoded' format to be executed by a machine. In fact the classic music score, or 'sheet music'[5], is an abstract representation meant to be decoded and executed by a human, thus it needs a series of imaginative, and so subjective, subsequent translations: after recognising the single note it's needed to imagine a performer playing it with the proper music instrument, so it can't be said that it contains 'recorded music', but an abstract representation of it. There are other types of scores which can instead be considered objective. The scores for player piano or for music boxes, in fact, are recorded music, no less than a vinyl or a compact disc, encoded in a mechanical standard, which in turn guarantees sufficient objectivity of the recording itself.

The Sounding Publication and Its Ephemeral Analog Media

Historically music magazines have tried to add recorded sounds in various formats, although struggling with the limits of the respective available media. Publishers started to have a chance to include vinyl records with the advent of the small 7" format, usually placing them within the magazines' or books' pages in order to protect their intrinsic fragility, sometimes miserably failing. That's why the technical solution of developing pure 'cardboard records', developed and used in the early seventies, could have been strategical: it'd have perfectly integrated a medium in the publishing workflow, which could have been then easily detached and used. Unfortunately the tests revealed on one hand a poor quality of sound, due to the poor details of cardboard grooves, and on the other hand being prone to weight in flattening the same grooves deteriorating sound quality even more. So although it'd have been a perfect extension in music magazines, it was used mainly as

paper use and speeding up the writing and typing process.[3]

relatively cheap gift integrated in cereal packaging.[6] But even before the cardboard record, in the middle sixties, another technology for printing a lightweight record meant to be included in printed magazines, got wider acceptance. The so called 'flexi discs' in fact, used thin flexible vinyl whose grooves were moulded, initially nicknamed as 'phonosheet' or 'soundsheet'. It was usually square with grooves in the center, and a detachable extension useful for stapling it into the magazine's centrefold, or being held in the spine, without damaging it. The flexi disc became very popular in the Soviet Union in its golden era, the sixties, as it was attached to popular magazines printed by the state.[7] At the end of seventies some tests to include software on it were attempted, transforming it into a so-called 'flexy-ROM', potentially opening a whole new digital world, but unfortunately becoming quickly a dead medium.[8] The last analogue medium that was used to extend the printed content has been the Compact Cassette, less easily 'attachable' to a magazine, but still cheap and compact enough to be packaged with the magazine itself, usually within a cellophane wrap. In this sense the whole Cassette Culture, established in the eighties' underground, created a spontaneous worldwide network through the exchange of mostly industrial and experimental music using this very medium and the global postal network as affordable and relatively fast distribution channel. There are at least a couple of remarkable examples in this movement which contributed to redefine the concept of music magazine, beyond its classic structure. The first was Tellus, a magazine made in New York in early eighties, entirely on an audio cassette, in the form of periodically edited music content. Despite it was subtitled "the audio cassette magazine", the editors claimed it was not a magazine but a "no wave Fluxus art form". Being issued fairly regularly, with a redaction of three editors, and with rigorously compiled mono-thematic issues, it's hard not to consider it a magazine in many respects.[9] In the same period, in Toronto, a city which at the time seemed to be culturally complementary to New York City and its lively publishing Lower East Side scene, another magazine was established with similar goals: Musicworks. It was a traditionally printed magazine, but being born by the collaboration between an early sound art gallery and another leading underground printed magazine, it was shaped around the its own flourishing scene, starting to include cassettes as perfect documenting companion.[10]

These attempts to integrate the sounds in the printed page (directly, or finding synergies with another medium that enabled the direct and natural expansion of the page) pushed the printed medium into being integrated in multiple media environments, but never losing, with the exception of Tellus, its primary format and its role of 'directional container'. In fact, the recognition of the

printed magazine as the 'perfect interface', acknowledges it to establish, through its own structure properly exploited by the editors, the direction towards the readers can be pointed to, even if they have to switch or split their attention to another sympathetic medium.

The Sounding Publication (and Its Ephemeral Digital Media)

When publishing got rid of print physical constrains and landed in the binary domain a new configuration of media was delineated. It included a wider range of other media, since they were reduced to very same basic nature (binary code), including sound, and so its integration in any form within or aside the text became a natural further step. The first generation of 'digital magazines', or the so called "disc magazines" (which at large included digital magazines produced on cassette, floppy discs, cd-rom and dvd-rom) formed its own scene, in some respect very similar to the printed zine one, but aware, ahead of time, of how to integrate different media within the very limited storage space (although suffering a bit from a being most of the time uninterested in proper editing). The first popular format was the floppy disc. A rather conceptual example was the Italian literary and Mail Art zine *Adenoidi*, adding a 5 1/4" floppy disc containing colour pictures – which were also printed in black-and-white inside the paper zine itself, with the missing colours indicated by text captions with arrows pointing to the corresponding fields.[11] A whole 'magazine' on floppy discs, called *The New Aladdin*, was envisioned and realised by editor John Henson in 1987. He assembled a bi-monthly general-interest magazine using most of the interactivity available back then: animated graphics, games, music and stories which allowed the reader to ask questions.[12] The so-called *Demoscene*, a "computer art subculture that specialises in producing demos, which are audio-visual presentations that run in real-time on a computer"[13] was the territory where different disc magazines were produced within the constraints of a floppy disc storage space, like *Caustic Verses*, which included text, software and music.[14] But paradoxically enough the floppy has been used more recently as a form of appealing retro-futurism, adopting the most efficient compression standards, than at its own times for the evident limits in storage. The album *Trunkeret & Ikonisk* by Jonas Olesen/Batch Totem, for example, has been released in 2007 by the *Ristretto* label, on a 3.5" floppy containing 74 minutes of music in 1.44 mb, through the GSM 6.10 WAV format.[15]

Since the arrival then of the compact disc in its 'data' oriented version, the CD-ROM, more and more publications were designed as 'interactive' magazines. One trend was to reproduce as faithfully as possible the conventions and standards of print, while adding 'bonus' animated or audio content. *Blender* magazine (and its close competitor, *Launch*) was one of the very first to do this, in 1994 – publishing a CD-ROM magazine with

original pop music-oriented content, including music, small videos and even advertisements.

Various 'interactive' CD-ROM magazines were also produced focusing on experimental interfaces, such as the seminal (and almost impossible to navigate) *Blam!*, which was in fact more a purely digital product than a normal publication. Yet another genre was defined by the emerging profession of digital designers, as exemplified by the mixed-digital-media *Gas Book*, a publication showcasing multimedia and electronic music talents within a single package consisting of a book, a CD-ROM, an audio CD, stickers and a T-shirt.[16] But the CD-ROM was also the last physical medium included for its capacity of containing data and/or software, on a much larger scale than the floppy disc. It has been the most effective medium to be attached to a publication, being cheap, minimally flexible, and with remarkable technical standards.

The mass access to telematic networks has then definitely changed the whole concept of 'augmenting' the static printed content with a more dynamic and continuously expandable one, but still being based in a physically and conceptually finite format. Internet and the other networks are coupling the terrific possibilities of digital with the real time access and responsiveness, which redefines the concept of distribution, or the time needed to make a cultural object available to be consumed in any place. This element potentially disrupts the space of the magazine, and its limits, not only because this space becomes infinitely ubiquitous with unlimited access through the network, but even more because on the networks the content is reciprocally linked through hyperlinks, so it's potentially infinite for every issue. It's not by accident then that one of the very first online magazines (dating back to 1994) was dedicated to a specific type of music: the rock-oriented *Addicted to Noise*. With no need of any sophisticated technology, it was the first online publication to include "audio sample alongside music reviews".[17] It clearly represents the end of the dichotomy between text and music, still maintained in all the previous examples, being them finally in the very same (digital) space, and they can also be enjoyed at the very same time. So if text and sound can be in the same time and space, in a digital networked form, the role of the static printed page becomes a different one: being pondered more than ever, meant to be preserved as long as possible, meant to represent a slower but more sophisticated reading experience. And this can be only reinforce by the use, for example, of QR codes. At end of year 2000s, in fact, different print magazines started to include QR codes in their pages, or black and white codes as large as stamps, that can be read and converted in URL by specific mobile phone apps, so paving the way to another plethora of dynamic ever-changing picture/sound/video extra content.

The Resonating Paper

But, after all its possible extensions then, an important question should also be posed: can paper itself 'resonate,'

eventually having the potential to directly convey sounds?

First this question should be properly framed, avoiding any reference to the metaphorical resonating power of words, but focusing instead on the physical properties of print and sound combined in a technical, conceptual and processual analysis. In this sense German artist Olaf Hochherz and his *Rooms to Carry Books Through CD* release can be inspiring. He uses a set-up consisting of an electronic instrument and ten speakers. The speakers are meant to properly distribute sounds across the room. The instrument is made by a rather elaborated combination of piezoelectric contact microphones and piezoelectric speakers placed inside a book. He uses first editions of early cybernetic theorists' essays, so these particular books, with that specific text printed, so with specific thoughts distributed through ink in that particular way, is influencing the transmission of sounds through the pages, becoming then both a resonator and a filter. The "instrument" he constructs is based then on the feedback which starts to flow between the piezo microphones and the speakers. In order to play it the composer presses his hands on the top of the book, thereby changing significantly the feedback conditions. [18] Although this system implies a complex external infrastructure, here the medium itself is induced to produce its own sounds, based on its specific physical properties, which are formally described also by its content, becoming the same object of the aural investigation and involving the listener in a sort of forced feedback.

Conclusions

The inclusion of the aural dimension within or aside to the printed page has been realised or simply attempted with various strategies aiming to expand the reading experience. As new technologies and new media have become available, the symbiosis between the sound-related content and the text commenting (an integration between two very different media) has become stronger and in multiple different balances. The current scenario includes a huge number of digital publications whose forms try to integrate text and sound as well, but are developed being prone to the easiest technical solution, more than conceptually keep the two elements on the same, or comparable level. The result is a disruption of the "reading experience," so consolidated in print and challenged instead in the ephemerality and instantaneousness of the screen. When it comes to including sound in a digital publishing format, the experiments made with print, should inform the digital embodiments, eventually investigate proper "hybrids," which would keep the reading flow intact embedding sound in a way that the reader could use the aural part as a natural component of his own reading experience, and

not just being a further element to cope with. These kind of publishing hybrids would eventually integrate the two media in a way that it won't be relevant anymore if the publication is printed or digital, but what kind of reading experience it is able to provide.

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