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Author Meets Critics

Eric Drott, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2574-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2099-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2787-4 (ebook)

Value in Streaming and the Value of Critique: A Response to Beilman, Mitchell, Ryu, Ritts, and Wang

Before anything else, I wish to thank the authors of the review—Abby Beilman, Jacob Mitchell, Jewon Ryu, Max Ritts and Shan-yu Wang—for their trenchant yet generous reading of my book, as well as the editors of the journal for allowing me the opportunity to respond. Reading their review brought to mind the truism that our words often exceed our intentions. A normal state of affairs with respect to everyday speech, the same stubborn reality holds true even for books that have undergone several rounds of review, revision, and editing. That one is never fully in control of one's utterances can be a source of anxiety. But it can also be a source of unexpected inspiration, even pleasure. Such was my experience with this review. True, much of the reviewers' response to the book roughly aligns with what I had hoped readers would get out of it. Particularly gratifying in this respect was their sensitivity to my arguments about how streaming simultaneously effects and depends on a socio-spatial dispersal of its enabling conditions; to the book's overarching concern with deciphering what the reviewers elegantly describe as "value-in-streaming"; and to the complications that ensue from the specific way that music straddles the representational and non-representational divide, among other things. Yet the fact that the review is written from the standpoint of critical geography, rather than that of my more familiar disciplinary stomping grounds in music studies, means that the authors pick up on themes and implications that largely eluded me in writing the book.

One place where this difference in perspective comes into focus is in the reframing of Chapter 2's concern with the political economy of the streaming platform along two complementary lines: at a macro level, in terms of the role that platformization has played in the recomposition of global production networks; and at a micro level, in terms of the localized

impacts that digital music's "affect economy" has on urban space. With respect to the second of these themes, their invocation of the role digital music may play in the ideological project of fashioning "creative" or "playground" cities was particularly resonant for me, given that where I live—Austin, Texas—has in many respects served as a poster child for precisely this brand of "elite spatiality". Music, moreover, has been at the center of its self-promotion as a city "built around pleasure" (Glaeser and Ratti 2023), one of the core elements of the quality-of-life appeals that Austin has pitched to businesses (including tech companies) it aims to lure to the region. Ironically, however, success in using music to drive growth has rebounded negatively on the local music scene, as rising housing costs have pushed a growing number of working musicians to relocate elsewhere (Sound Music Cities 2023). That many of the companies setting up offices in Austin are also leading forces in the platform economy compounds the irony: for even as corporations like Alphabet and Amazon push up the cost of living in the city and surrounding region, they are also responsible for the platforms that have made it harder for many artists to make a living in the first place.

At the other end of the spectrum, the reviewers' note that the perspective provided by global production networks might constitute a fruitful line of further inquiry into the conditions and consequences of music's platformization. This is a position I wholeheartedly endorse. The GPN framework, along with other, affiliated models (e.g. commodity chain analysis), promises to enrich the understandably less well-developed geographic imagination that prevails within music studies. Not that matters of geography have been entirely absent from the field: music scholars have long been concerned with the dialectical push-and-pull between music's local embeddedness and its global circulation. Yet the field's methodological humanism means that the bulk of its attentions to date has been centered on how geography shapes a fairly narrow range of objects, above all music and musicians. By contrast, the material infrastructures that undergird musical life and the transnational flows they facilitate have received comparatively less attention. Happily, though, this is beginning to change, thanks to recent music research informed by political ecology, political economy, media theory, and the like. One might cite in this regard Kyle Devine's study of the resource extraction and waste generated by different recording formats in his book *Decomposed* (2019), or the different media ecologies surveyed in the volume

Devine has co-edited with Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, *Audible Infrastructures* (2021), or prior work that Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (2014) have undertaken on mobile music technologies, among other interventions. Yet much more work remains to be done in tracing the different supply chains that music finds itself caught up in, in disentangling the various "intra-, inter-, and extra-firm networks" (Coe and Yeung 2015: 14) that comprise music's specific platform ecology, or in exploring how systems of music production, circulation, and consumption find themselves affected by the ongoing reorganization of global production networks (recent semiconductor shortages being a case in point, given how dependent the modern music industry is on digital technologies of various stripes).

At the same time, one thing that research on music streaming platforms throws into relief is how varied these production chains can be, both in terms of how they are organized and what they produce and circulate. Apart from the music production pipeline by which platforms are fed new content, or the material and energetic inputs needed to keep the streams streaming, it is also necessary to take into account the flows of data that platforms simultaneously ingest, produce, and extrude (discussed in Chapter 3 of the book); the production of metrics mediating between the attention economy at work within platforms and the broader money economies in which they are embedded (discussed in Chapter 4); the flows of affect and energy that platforms harness and direct via music, which then feed into wider circuits of production and social reproduction (discussed in Chapter 5); and so forth. In this regard, the study of music and music platforms may do more than passively benefit from research in GPNs and the like. It may also make a positive contribution to such research. Specifically, music studies might shed useful light on phenomena—such as affect or aesthetics—that figure less prominently in economic geography. A case in point is recent work by Anaar Desai-Stephens (2022) on the rise of YouTube in India, and the way in which a certain "aesthetics of intimacy" was instrumental to its growth over the course of the 2010s. Noting how a certain effect of liveness, co-presence, and direct address helped to generate engagement on the platform, Desai-Stephens (2022) persuasively argues that the resulting aesthetic was itself infrastructuralized, before being displaced once YouTube India's courtship of major Bollywood production studios began to bear fruit towards the end of the 2010s.

One last place where the discrepancy between intention and reception showed up in the review was in the question of streamed music's cheapness. The reviewers note that my use of the term could be understood as a "modernist swipe" at the new kinds of creativity that digital platforms enable. Fair enough. But to be clear, my use of "cheap" wasn't meant to serve as a measure of aesthetic worth. Rather, the word was intended in a strictly economic sense, to designate both a structural condition and ideological effect of streaming. As a structural condition, it designates how costs are systemically displaced within digital capitalism, shifted onto any number of externalized others: exploitable or expropriable sources of labor power, the environment, institutions and infrastructures in disrepair, to name a few. As an ideological effect, it refers to something akin to but not exactly equivalent to Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, as the negligible price of the stream obfuscates the various subsidies and unaccounted-for externalities that it depends upon. Here again, though, perhaps my choice of phrasing overshot my intention; perhaps there is a way in which my attempt to hold aesthetic and cultural critique at arm's length from political economy was destined to fall short. And perhaps this isn't such a bad thing. In recent decades music scholars—with some notable exceptions[1]—have increasingly shied away from cultural critique, to say nothing of the normative questions of musical value that they raise. This is understandable. Not only is there a long history of such critique providing cover for either ill-informed elitism (think of Adorno's writings on jazz) or a whole slew of implicit and not-so-implicit gender, race, and class biases (think of the rockist disdain for pop music). Beyond this, the entire sociocultural project of critique has come under fire of late, or has been redefined so as to downplay its negativity in favor of a more affirmative—and presumably efficacious—mode of engaging with the world (Felski 2015; Latour 2004).[2] But given the compounding crises we face at present, it is not at all clear that it's a winning strategy to discard one of the main tools by which we can intervene in and act upon the existing order of things. Whatever the limitations of sociocultural critique, they do not justify

[1] See for example James (2015), Ritchey (2019), and Rekret (2024).

[2] For an example of a critique of critique that downplays concerns about music streaming specifically, see Hesmondhalgh (2022).

its dismissal. They are rather a reason to undertake critique with greater care, consideration, and reflexivity—in short, to engage in the critique of music and the sociocultural conditions it indexes not less but even more critically. And, as the reviewers note, it needs to be undertaken with sufficient dialectical nuance—provided that dialectics is understood not as a bland moderation of opposites (a "neither-this-nor-that-but-a-little-of-both" mode of interpretation), but as an effort to uncover the immanent contradictions that animate cultural artifacts. Once more I find myself in agreement with the reviewers: there is certainly "room for more aesthetic inquiry". And hopefully future work, whether by me or other scholars, will interrogate more thoroughly the aesthetics of platformized music, with all its political resonances, possibilities, and constraints.

I will leave things there, though more could be said. Indeed, much more needs to be said—about streaming, the political economy of platforms, music's uneasy relation to capitalism, and the effects that all of the above have on culture. This need stems in part from the unstable and remarkably fluid state of the streaming economy. One thing I was painfully aware of in writing the book is how it was always fated to be incomplete, given the fact that by the time it was published the landscape it surveyed would almost certainly have shifted. Unsurprisingly, this has indeed come to pass: since submitting the final manuscript, Spotify and Deezer—under pressure from Universal Music Group—have indicated that they will undertake a major revision of their revenue sharing model, one that will likely result in a further redistribution of wealth to major labels and rights holders. Nor is this the only way the book is incomplete. It also pays less attention than I would like to one of the most important developments of recent years, namely the expansion of streaming within various parts of the Global South, either through the incursion of North American or European platforms into local markets or through the development of homegrown alternatives like Boomplay in Nigeria, Jiosaavn or Wynk in India, Anghami in the MENA region, and so forth. To some extent the decision to restrict the scope of my book to the major platforms operating in the Global North was a necessary evil, since I lack the requisite expertise to do justice to the different local and regional music industries in question. Thankfully there are a number of other scholars who have begun the important work of analyzing streaming as a global phenomenon. In addition to Anaat Desai-Stephen's study of YouTube's growth in

India, one might cite Sprengel (2023), on the sense among actors in the Egyptian music industry of always falling behind the music economies of the Global North, an experience of what she terms "imperial lag"; or Siles et al. (2022), on how Latin American artists' seek to navigate the curatorial power wielded by platforms like Spotify; or Coppenrath (2021), on the new opportunities for monetizing music that streaming has afforded some Kyrgyzstani hip hop artists—albeit at the price of having to cater to the tastes of international rather than local audiences. If it is true, then, that the streaming economy is a moving target, especially as its center of gravity tilts towards the Global South, it also appears true that the model of the streaming platform looks to be with us for the foreseeable future. The writing of *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* may be over and done with, but if the review and my response are any indication, critical examination of music in the age of platforms has only just begun.

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