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Abstract

Economists and sociologists of music have long argued that the live music sector must lose out in the competition for leisure expenditure with the ever increasing variety of mediated musical goods and experiences. In the last decade, though, there is evidence that live music in the UK is one of the most buoyant parts of the music economy. In examining why this should be so this paper is divided into two parts. In the first I describe why and how live music remains an essential part of the music industry's money making strategies. In the second I speculate about the social functions of performance by examining three examples of performance as entertainment: karaoke, tribute bands and the Pop Idol phenomenon. These are, I suggest, examples of secondary performance, which illuminate the social role of the musical performer in contemporary society.

1. The Economics of Performance

Introduction

It has long been an academic commonplace that the rise of mediated music (on record, radio and the film soundtrack) meant the decline of live music (in concert hall, music hall and the domestic parlour). For much of the last 50 years the UK's live music sector, for example, has been analysed as a sector in decline. Two kinds of reason are adduced for this.

On the one hand, economists, following the lead of Baumol and Bowen (1966), have assumed that live music can achieve neither the economies of scale nor the reduction of labour costs to compete with mass entertainment media. To cite a familiar example, 'in 1780 four quartet players required forty minutes to play a Mozart composition; today forty minutes of labour are still required.' (Cowen, 1996, 208) And, at the same time, the size of paying audience a live quartet can reach is still restricted by acoustics: its sound can only fill a limited space. It is inevitable, then, that as a matter of economic survival concert promoters have to raise ticket prices faster than overall inflation. Meanwhile, the mass media, taking full advantage of both economies of scale (a single master recording can supply a global market with the same Mozart CD) and technological means of reducing production costs (live performers replaced by recorded performances) can keep the rising prices of its goods well below inflation. In these circumstances, performance of classical and contemporary art music has become entirely

reliant on state subsidy. To price tickets according to concerts' true costs would be to restrict entry to a small super-rich elite (like the market for original art works). Hence the recurring predictions of orchestral demise and the fact that the level of state support of the UK's orchestras and opera houses remains an ongoing and well publicised political issue for both the Arts Council England and the Scottish Arts Council.

On the other hand, popular music sociologists and historians have documented the impact of recording technology on public and private uses of music, and shown how job opportunities for live musicians have declined while musical activity has been increasingly domesticated (see, for example, Frith, 1987; Sanjek and Sanjek, 1991). Cinema organists were made redundant by talking pictures; pit orchestras were replaced by pre-recorded tapes, pub singers by juke boxes, dance halls with dance bands by discos with DJs. As people spent more time listening to music at home (on record, radio and television) so they spent less time going to hear live performers in bar rooms and public halls. At the same time, the domestic use of music has been personalised: family entertainment moved from the piano to the phonogram, from the living room radiogram to the bedroom transistor, from the hi-fi system as household furniture to the walkman and the iPod as personal music accessories. For socio-cultural as well as economic reasons, then, the live music sector seemed doomed to extinction, surviving only as the result of state-subsidised conservation.

Of course the story has never been this simple and in the last decade, in particular, there has been increasing evidence that the 'decline of live music' describes a more complicated situation. Recent surveys of the UK music industry suggest that live music is one of its more buoyant sectors. Williamson et al (2003) found that live music was the only Scottish music activity attracting inward investment. The latest UK-wide music industry survey (by Creative and Cultural Skills, a government agency set up to support training in music and other creative industries) found that the live business was the biggest employer in the music sector (*Music Week* August 19 2006, pp. 4-5). In March 2006 *MusicWeek* had anticipated the annual meeting of the International Live Music Convention by reporting that 'the live industry is in rude health' and predicting continued growth on the back of two years of record-breaking ticket sales.

The growing importance of the live music business is reflected in both corporate and state activity. UK venues and promotions are increasingly controlled by a small number of international operators: Live Nation (the live music business of the US-based Clear Channel); Dennis Desmond's Irish-based MCD; the US company AEG (owner of the Millennium Dome, which is being reopened as a live venue in 2007); Simon Moran's SJM group. Live Nation thus controls the Cardiff International Arena and, with MCD, Wembley Arena, the Astoria and the Mean Fiddler business (including the Glastonbury Festival). MCD and SJM own DF Concerts (Scotland's biggest promoter) and thusT in the Park. In 2007, after a complicated set of negotiations (and investigations by both the Office for Fair Trading and the Competition Commission), Live Nation and Dennis Desmond took over the Academy Music Group chain (selling the Hammersmith Apollo and Kentish Town Forum to the Mama Group, owner of the Barfly chain, following a Competition Commission requirement). Further evidence that, in Music

Week's words, 'what was once a sector renowned for its glorious amateurism is being taken over by multi-billion-dollar corporations' came in 2007 with the opening of a new London headquarters for the William Morris Agency following a similar move by their US rivals, Creative Artists Agency in 2006. (Larkin, 2007)

Meanwhile, in 2004, the Government set up the Live Music Forum (chaired by ex-Understone, Feargal Sharkey) to promote live music in public places and to monitor the effects of the 2003 Licensing Act, which tightened up its regulation.¹ Such state interest in live music as a creative industry marks a clear move away from the Labour Government's initial equation of the music industry with the recording industry. By September 2006 it was seriously considering a plan to create 'a dedicated academy to educate and train the promoters of the future.' In the words of Feargal Sharkey, 'the UK's live music scene is in great shape but promoters and festival organisers all suffer a lack of trained technicians.' (quoted in Ashton, 2006) The live industry may be flourishing but there are no courses covering such issues as health and safety, and so a consortium of interests, including Live Nation, the Academy Music Group, the Royal Opera House and the Arts Council are supporting a bid by Creative and Cultural Skills to create a Live Performing Arts Academy to be opened (if the bid is approved by the Education Secretary) in 2009.

Faced with such evidence, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the decline of live music, inevitable according to economists and sociologists, has been reversed. The UK live sector is, in Feargal Sharkey's words, experiencing a 'boom' (Ashton, 2006). How can we explain this? In addressing this question this paper is divided into two parts. In the Part 1 I describe why and how live music remains an essential part of the music industry's money making strategies. In part 2 I speculate about the social functions of performance by examining three examples of performance as entertainment: karaoke, tribute bands and the Pop Idol phenomenon.

Performance and economic value

To begin with the economics. It is important to stress that the basic premises of Baumol and Bowen's original argument remain valid. There are still limits on the size of the audience one can physically reach in a live show and the costs of live music do continue to rise faster than general inflation. In the USA, for example, the average ticket price for rock concerts rose 82% between 1996 and 2003 while the Consumer Price Index rose by only 17%. (Krueger, 2005) While comparative data for the UK isn't available, it is safe to assume that similar price rises lie behind the economic health of the sector reported by *MusicWeek*. Such data suggest that the live sector does indeed suffer from Baumol and Bowen's disease. But the disease hasn't been fatal.

The immediate reason for this is that live music doesn't, in fact, compete with mediated music for leisure spending but, rather, has been absorbed together with recorded music into a

1 www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Creative_industries/music/live_music_forum.htm

single, more complicated music market. And the underlying point here is not that economists got things wrong but that sociologists did. The value of music (the reasons why people are prepared to pay money for it) remains centred in its live experience, and record companies and broadcasters have had to take this into account.

Because live music matters to its audiences, its promoters have been able to follow two strategies, in particular, for dealing with their cost problem. They have, first, expanded audience size—by increasing the capacity of venues, by broadening the scope of ‘the tour’, and, above all, by growing a new sort of musical event, the festival. (All these strategies have been dependent, in turn, on the technological and aesthetic valorisation of volume, enabling musicians to be heard by far more people in much bigger spaces.) These developments can be traced most clearly in the history of the live rock music industry. The live rock circuit began in the late 1960s with ballrooms (such as Bill Graham’s Fillmore West and East, with capacities of c.2000) but in the early 1970s moved into arenas and stadiums with capacities of 20,000 and upwards (see Chapple and Garofalo, 1977, pp.137-154, and, for a stimulating study of Grand Funk Railroad as the pioneer of arena rock, Waksman forthcoming). In Britain the Exhibition Centres built in Birmingham, Glasgow and Manchester in the 1970s and 1980s (with 10,000+ seats) became essential for the live rock business, not least because without venues of such size the UK risked losing out on what were now the biggest bands’ global touring schedules.

But for British promoters the most significant means of expanding the size of the live audience has undoubtedly been the festival. Festivals are the key asset in the portfolios of the international corporations now dominating British concert promotion and the economic reasons for this are obvious. Not only can the crowd size be expanded (to 50,000 plus over a weekend—the Glastonbury Festival was relaunched in 2007, following its 2006 suspension while its facilities were being improved, with ticket sales of 175,000) but economies of scale can kick in (a great variety of bands are covered by the same staging, ticketing and marketing costs). The British rock industry is now organised around the summer festival season—Glastonbury, T in the Park, Reading and Leeds—and, of course, festivals are equally essential in other music worlds—folk (Cambridge), jazz (Brecon), classical (Edinburgh), world (WOMAD), etc. 2006 saw the launch of a new generation of ‘niche’ or ‘boutique’ festivals, following the growing success of the long-established All Tomorrow’s Parties. Mean Fiddler mounted the Latitude Festival in Suffolk, for example. It combines music with politics, comedy and literature for an audience of 12-15,000 (Larkin, 2006d).

Music Week’s survey of the live sector’s UK earnings in 2005 gives some measure of the success of these rock strategies: REM’s Hyde Park concert grossed almost £2.5 million; Duran Duran’s gig at Birmingham City’s football stadium, almost £1 million; Live Nation’s (relatively small) Download Festival, £1.1 million. As Larkin concludes:

Such figures serve to illustrate what many have suspected for some time—that as it becomes increasingly difficult to generate revenues from the sale of recorded music, it

is the live sector which increasingly provides a means of survival for most acts. (Larkin, 2006b)

But such survival isn't just a matter of larger audiences and higher ticket prices. Promoters' (and artists') second solution to the cost disease has been to expand the earnings potential of a live event. Historically, of course, live venues have not only made money from ticket prices, but also from the sale of drink and food, from programmes and from cloakroom and parking costs. But what is now key to rock performers' earnings is merchandise—the ever expanding range of tee-shirts, sweatshirts and other clothing, posters, bags and other souvenirs. Now in one sense what is being exploited here is simply an occasion—the gathering of fans in one place is a good opportunity to sell them products that they could, in fact, buy elsewhere. Thus jazz, folk and classical concerts have long been important opportunities for performers to sell their CDs. But something more is at stake in rock merchandise: what is being sold is a memento of *being there*, a product unique to the event (and digital technology has made available a new sort of CD for sale—an instant recording of the concert itself, available only to the concert goers).²

The point I want to stress here, then, is not simply the economic importance of concert merchandise (acts get a much higher percentage of the returns on merchandise sales than on ticket sales; for some acts merchandise income certainly matches and may even surpass their performance fee) but its indicative importance. A live concert is not simply a transitory experience but also symbolises what it means to be a music fan. This is not just a sociological argument; it has economic consequences too. The conventional argument in rock analysis has been that live concerts exist courtesy of the record industry: their function is to promote records, to which they are subordinate (and for which purpose they are subsidised). But this argument no longer seems valid.

On the one hand, there are certainly now major acts (the Rolling Stones being the best example) who gross more from live performance than from record sales and for whom a new record release acts to promote a new tour rather than vice versa. Indeed, this seems to be part of the trajectory of the rock career: acts who can command the highest ticket prices and hence the biggest live earnings, are those whose peak popularity in terms of record sales was years ago. Connolly and Kreuger have calculated that only 4 of the top 35 rock/pop artists who toured the US in 2002 earned more from their recordings/ publishing than from live concerts (the four being Eminem, Jay-Z, Linkin Park and Brian 'Baby' Williams). 28 of the remaining 31 acts (led by Paul McCartney) had had careers stretching back at least 20 years, and for all of these performers live earnings were far, far greater than recording/ publishing earnings.

2 While most fan clubs organize special events, hotel deals, etc as part of the show 'packages' they sell, some acts are more enterprising than others. Wet Wet Wet fans can buy tickets for the group's soundcheck; Iron Maiden fans can—at a price—be flown to the gig by Bruce Dickinson! Thanks to Martin Cloonan for this information.

(Interestingly, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who could be said to be in mid-career, earned the same, £6.1 million, from performance and recordings/publishing—see Connolly and Kreuger 2005, Table 1.1)

On the other hand, in the context of downloading, My Space and declining record sales, the straightforward relationship between live performance and record promotion has anyway broken down. Kreuger hypothesises that the large increase in rock concert prices in the US in the 1990s reflects the fact that acts (and/or their record companies) no longer had any incentive to keep prices down in the expectation that bigger audiences would translate into higher record sales. Rather, they seek now to maximise profits from concerts as unique events:

new technology that allows many potential customers to obtain recorded music without purchasing a record has severed the link between the two products. As a result concerts are being priced more like single-market monopoly products. (Kreuger, 2006, p. 26)

Kreuger calls his hypothesis ‘the Bowie theory’ in reference to David Bowie’s prediction that ‘music itself is going to become like running water or electricity,’ and his advice to fellow performers that, ‘You’d better be prepared for doing a lot of touring because that’s really the only unique situation that’s going to be left.’ (quoted in Kreuger, 2006, p. 26)

It is this suggestion that the live show is the only ‘unique situation left’ that both accounts for the value that audiences are willing to put on their attendance (hence the above inflationary price rises) but which also, paradoxically, puts live music promoters in a potentially beneficial relationship with music mass media. For record companies, their acts’ live concerts offer something new to market. This was the thinking behind the 1990s launch of the DVD record packaging music tracks with concert footage. It also explains EMI’s highly publicised deal with Robbie Williams, in which ownership of his brand image is as significant as ownership of his recorded masters (and in which footage of his live concerts has been as valuable as his record sales).

The crucial point here, though, is that for music-using media like radio and television, access to live performance is becoming as important as access to music recordings. In Britain we can see this most clearly in the way in which music festivals have become a key part of the broadcast music schedule. The BBC’s deal with the Glastonbury Festival, for example, gives it programme material that is used across its various radio and television stations (at both peak and off peak times). Scottish Television schedules material from T in the Park as late night broadcasting for weeks afterwards. Again this is hardly a new phenomenon (the Proms have long been central to the BBC’s classical music programming) but it does undermine the suggestion (implicit in Baumol and Bowen’s analysis) that live music must necessarily compete with recorded music in the media market (although, of course, the Musicians’ Union did indeed lose the struggle to limit the hours of recorded music broadcast). Even a company like MTV, initially premised on the continuous broadcasting of pop videos, has increasingly felt the need to broadcast live music footage to retain its audience. MTV, like other specialist music

broadcasters, is nowadays as concerned to negotiate rights to showcase concerts as to stream videos, while its most significant investment in branding is its live annual awards ceremony.³

And this brings me back to the final economic point. The value of live music concerts to the media—and to television in particular (as symbolised by the global transmission of the Live Aid and Live 8 concerts), their ability to attract an audience but also to represent a community, is what also makes them valuable to advertisers. One significant solution to the cost problem, to put this another way, is to find people who will subsidise shows. Economists usually discuss this issue by reference to the state subsidy of classical concerts (and the political and economic problems this raises—see Peacock, 1993). But in rock and pop worlds subsidy comes from commercial sponsors who are willing to pay for the opportunity to reach a particular live (and now radio and television) audience and/or to have their brand associated with a particular act. Thus in 2005 Carling invested £6 million in British live music: the Academy Music Group's eight venues are known as Carling Academies; what was once the Reading Festival is now Carling Weekend: Reading and Leeds (Balakrishnan, 2006). In Scotland, Tennents puts money into live music at so many levels, from the mainstream T in the Park to the avant-garde Tryptich, that if it were to change its branding policy the Scottish live music scene would struggle to survive in its present shape (Williamson et al., 2003).

It is perhaps not surprising that brewers like Carling and Tennents invest heavily in live music (live music and drink have always been associated) but the particular role which live music plays in a music industry being transformed by digital technology is captured by another *Music Week* news item. On March 4, 2006, the magazine noted that 'The UK's first televised awards ceremony for live music is being launched ... Delivered as a project by Vodaphone and Channel 4, and with the backing of the BPI and the Live Music Forum, the initiative will act as a platform for live music not just on television, but also via mobile, the internet and radio.' (Larkin, 2006a) Meanwhile O2 expects to spend £7 million pounds on music sponsorship in 2007, when the Millennium Dome becomes a music venue—the O2! (Balakrishnan, 2006)

Performance and cultural value

Paradoxically, then, the digital revolution in the storage and distribution of music has only served to underline the continued cultural—and therefore economic—importance of live music, which remains vital for almost all music genres. Baumol and Bowen's predictions have not been borne out. Mediated forms of music have not displaced live performance. Rather, it has adapted itself to new economic and social circumstances. Indeed, one could argue the converse: the record industry itself was shaped by consumer understanding of recorded music as live music. This is perhaps most obvious in the classical music world, in which the 'concert

3 See Cloonan (2006, p.134) for a discussion of the perceived value of the annual MTV Europe Award to the host city. Scottish Enterprise provided a £1 million investment in the Edinburgh event in 2004, justifying this in terms of the publicity generated for Scotland as a tourist attraction and cultural centre.

hall experience' is still the ideal of classical music recording. As Colin Symes argues, 'classical records, by and large, attempt to recreate the concert hall in a domestic environment and aim to make the best seat in the house the *best seat in the house*—a telling string of words in this connection, encapsulating the keystone discourse governing classical recording that only a few have had the temerity to challenge.' (Symes, 2004, p. 62).

Symes is interested in the resulting 'practices of deception' adopted by the community of classical record engineers and producers, on the one hand, and marketing and promotional departments, on the other. What I want to stress, though, is the ideological power of the ideal listening experience—the classical music concert as it was constructed in the mid-19th century—in this new 20th century technological context. The value of classical records, it seems, is that they enable their consumers to reproduce this 'live' experience for themselves. And classical music broadcasters have been constrained by the same ideology. Joseph Horowitz shows how the mode of rapt, superior musical appreciation so laboriously constructed by US concert promoters and conductors in the 19th century was adapted to new media (record companies and the radio) and a new audience (the advertiser-friendly middle class): 'Radio offered the Metropolitan Opera and the NBC Symphony on Saturdays, the New York Philharmonic and 'The Ford Hour' on Sundays ... and the weekday schedule might include more than a dozen live broadcasts of hinterlands orchestras and studio recitals.' (Horowitz, 1987, pp. 197-198). The BBC, in the same period, set up its own classical and light music orchestras, to play live on radio, as it were.

Keith Negus concludes similarly, from his historical survey of music on British television, that 'very few musicians, composers, songwriters or performers seem to have used television to develop a distinctively new art form. Regardless of genre (big-band, operatic, rock, symphonic, chamber), musicians and television personnel have tended to treat television as if it were a neutral lens, rather than a transformative medium that can redefine, or develop innovative types of, musical performance.' (Negus, 2006, p.5) The problem for television producers (like record producers) was how to make the live concert work in the home, on a screen. What is assumed, again, is that the value of music is encapsulated in its live performance. It is, then, perhaps not surprising, that despite Baumol and Bowen's predictions, in the US, at least, 'even the live performance of the classics have risen rather than stagnated. From 1965 to 1990 America grew from having 58 symphony orchestras to having nearly 300, and from having 27 opera companies to more than 150.' (Cowen, 1996, p. 211)

The same argument can be applied to most forms of popular music. According to the much discussed notion of 'authenticity', for example—the central value term in rock, folk and jazz music (see Moore, 2002)—the live show is the truest form of musical expression, the setting in which musicians and their listeners alike can judge whether what they do is 'real'.⁴ These arguments are familiar and, as with classical music, one can point to the ways in

4 For illuminating ethnographic studies of the importance of the live event for people's understanding of what rock and jazz 'mean', see Cavicchi 1998 and Berger 1999.

which record, radio, television and video producers have developed ways of representing music that make reference to the ideal live show. But three further aspects of the popular belief in live music are worth noting here.

First, the emergence of the festival as the high point of many people's musical year suggests that what is valuable for the festival audience is not the live performance of a particular group for its particular fans, but 'live performance' as a kind of abstract ideal. 2006's T in the Park, for example, was sold out within minutes of the tickets going on sale (on the Web), at which time *no acts had been announced*.

Second, live gigs and venues are essential to the mythology of rock, folk, jazz and country music fans. Read the history of any local scene in the UK and you will come across a paean of nostalgic praise to a now defunct venue, a place which for all its filth and seediness (the reason it is now defunct) is nonetheless seen as *essential* to a city's musical soul (in Glasgow, for example, such a legendary venue is the Apollo).⁵

Third, it is noticeable that even those genres which are not 'authentic' in these terms nevertheless use live shows to cement their fan base. The boy band, McFly, grossed more than £500,000 from its three nights at the Scottish Exhibition Centre in 2005 while the Backstreet Boys grossed £1.1 million from its four dates in London, Manchester and Birmingham. (Larkin, 2006b). And even the dance music scene, which was at one time taken to mark the end of the valorisation and romanticisation of live music (see Thornton, 1995) developed its own 'live' values with the rise of the superstar DJ and the drawing power of their 'in person' performance.

So far in this paper I have been concerned to show, first, that despite well founded predictions from both economists and sociologists, the live music sector continues to flourish and, second, that across genres the concert (its format remarkably unchanged by music's mediation by record, radio and television) continues to be the experience which for most music lovers defines their musical values. (We would, on the whole, be baffled by someone who said they loved particular performers but had no desire to see them live.)⁶ What I want to do now is turn to a different question: *why* does live music matter so much in popular culture, given the overwhelming presence and availability of 'piped' and 'canned' music or, to use less negative terms, the ever increasing size of people's private musical archives (whether as record collections or iPod files)? To put this question another way: *what is live music for?*

5 For a recent example of such a history (of Southampton), see Gray (2006).

6 Though as John Butt reminds me, there are dedicated fans of dead performers.

2. The Sociology of Performance

Introduction

In addressing this question I want to focus on the emergence over the last 20 years of three new forms of performance-as-entertainment (or entertainment-as performance): karaoke, tribute bands, and reality TV shows like *Pop Idol*. Each of these phenomena has become a familiar part of the leisure economy and each combines live and mediated music.

Karaoke was originally a Japanese activity but spread around the world remarkably quickly (see Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998). While it is primarily a local affair (a staple of pub nights in Britain) and ideologically amateur (the point of karaoke is to let ordinary people sing) it has in certain respects been institutionalised (through the karaoke competition, for example—see Drew 2001), commodified (in such major label CD products as the *Pop Party* series) and given a TV makeover (in programmes like *Stars in Their Eyes*).

Tribute bands seem to have first been established as a professional form of entertainment in Australia but again quickly became internationally popular (see Homan, 2006). Long established tribute bands like Bjorn Again and the Bootleg Beatles, can sell out stadiums but tribute groups are equally significant in local live scenes (see the discussion of the Benwell Floyd in Bennett, 2001). Some orchestral activities can also, perhaps, be included here: the now familiar Viennese nights (with dancers and the players in period costume) or evenings with Mozart by Candlelight (with real candles).

The *Pop Idol* format was created by a British pop entrepreneur, Simon Cowell (also behind *X Factor*) but very rapidly sold round the world. In some countries, such as Spain and, indeed, the USA (where the show became *American Idol*) the programme has had a dramatic effect on record sales and star making. There is a long tradition of talent shows on television (in Britain beginning with *Opportunity Knocks*) and many pop stars got their start this way, but *Pop Idol* changed the talent spotting format in two crucial ways. First, it drew on the conventions developed in the 1990s by so-called 'reality' TV to focus on the *process* by which an ordinary person is turned into a performer of some sort. (The *Faking It* series thus had episodes in which unlikely people became in a few weeks, a conductor, a DJ and a rock singer.) Second, it took from *Big Brother* audience participation by phone voting and texting. There are now numerous other TV programmes which have, more or less straightforwardly, adapted the *Pop Idol* format, applying it, for example, to opera and the musical (with *Operatunity* and *How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?*) In Britain nearly all such shows (in least in their early series) have been successful in terms of both viewing figures and subsequent record sales.

Making sense of secondary performance

Karaoke, tribute bands and reality TV shows occupy quite different positions in the music economy but as forms of entertainment they have significant common features. They all involve

a ‘pretend’ performance that has something to do with a ‘real’ one (though they are in themselves all real performances with real audiences). Their various performances have different kinds of relationship with their originals—appropriation, imitation, approximation—but all might be called *secondary* performances: a primary performance, the ‘proper’ way of doing, it is always being evoked.⁷ This aspect of these performances—the comparison with the real thing—is explicit. These performances involve *evaluation*, by both formally appointed judges and by the public/audience. This is even true of tribute bands: their continuing success depends on their audiences’ assessment of their authenticity as copies!

There are a number of issues that can be pursued here but I want to focus on one: what is the relationship of these kinds of performance to primary performance? Are the pleasures the same?

Not exactly. To begin with these performers aren’t stars and their non-stardom is part of the performing point, though one might know or get to know them as personalities.⁸ Such shows therefore have a high potential for embarrassment, obvious, for example, in the early audition rounds of *X Factor*. Here the mismatch between performing ambition and ability can be quite startling (as, indeed, it often is at a pub’s karaoke night). For the audience, secondary performances involve a great deal of laughter and astonishment.

This is related to my second point above: the element of judgement means that the audience is in a way detached from the performance, observing it as a *performance* rather than being drawn into it or imaginatively and emotionally becoming part of it. Such detachment is obviously most marked when appointed judges publicly comment on these would-be performers and decide which of the *Pop Idol* contestants or karaoke singers is the best, but it is in the nature of secondary performance that everyone in the audience is judging what they see and hear. And the question then is this: what does such evaluation reveal about the social meaning of the primary performances to which these performers implicitly (and often explicitly—as with tribute bands) refer?

The answer lies, I think, in the tension in popular cultural ideology between performance as something *learnt* (a matter of technique, the appropriate gestures) and performance

7 There are obviously echoes here of the pursuit of authenticity in the early music movement in the classical world—performers refer to the primary (historical) performance by adopting authentic (period) instruments, performing styles, settings and acoustics. But the primary/secondary model isn’t applicable to the usual way in which classical music listeners and critics judge a realized, material performance against the abstract, ideal performance imagined in the score—for discussion of the concept of the ideal performance, see Goehr (1995-6).

8 This argument is perhaps complicated by such shows as *Celebrity Stars in Their Eyes* or *Celebrity Fame Academy* in which participants are minor stars, but such shows have never had the impact of the programmes they copy and they work, on the whole, as conventional TV entertainment.

as something meant (self-expressive, heartfelt, revealing something of the performer's 'real' personality). The good secondary performance is therefore something both obviously fake (because it involves acquiring abilities performers don't just have, inherently; abilities determined and shaped from the outside by teachers, mentors, other performers, audiences) and real (because a matter of truth-to self and honesty to one's audience—what's at stake in the way judgements work here is always the performer's perceived sincerity).

The issues raised here are not peculiar to popular culture. They reflect a general understanding of musical talent and what that talent means and are equally apparent in conservatories which similarly distinguish between technical efficiency, the learnt ability to play properly, and musicality, the expressive, individual ability that comes from within. (For an illuminating ethnographic study of a US conservatory see Kingsbury 1988) As I've already noted, in the classical music world live performance is taken to be the moment when the music itself speaks most directly to its listeners. Critics are suspicious of performers who too obviously revel in their artifice or virtuosity. Here is *Guardian* critic Tim Ashley on singer Cecilia Bartoli. Bartoli, he writes, 'could be accused of unearthing second-rate music for the express purpose of showing off, for what she now presents us with is a vocal Olympiad, at which we are primarily invited to marvel at her technique ... Bartoli is always impressive but rarely moving. It is artifice rather than art.' (quoted in Frith, 2004, p. 16)

The conservatory ideal, then, is the performance that doesn't draw attention to itself, either with missed notes and technical infelicity or with too self-conscious a display of performance as process, but which is, nevertheless, clearly expressive of both composer's and musician's personality. Quite what this means in performing practice is not necessarily easy to assess, and it is entertaining to compare the expert comments on the performers in the BBC's *Young Musician* (a biennial competition for classical instrumentalists) with the expert comments on the performers in such shows as *X Factor*. The criteria of excellence are obviously different, but they are not articulated any more clearly, and this is a source of considerable stress for trainee performers, for music students for whom part of the educational process is, in fact, the separation of potential professionals from those who will never be more than amateurs. (Dibben, 2006)

Historically these pressures haven't faced popular performers, or at least not in these terms. Their training is less formalised and the amateur/professional distinction less clear cut. One striking feature of the reality TV pop shows, though, is the way in which the account of performance offered (by both competitors and judges) reflects the emerging influence on British pop of stage schools. The 1980s success of the US television show (and live touring act), *Fame*, inspired the opening of a host of private stage schools around the country and the UK now has two national performing academies (supported by a mix of industry and state funds): the Brit School for the Performing Arts and Technology, opened in London in 1992, and the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, opened in 1996. These academies are based on the premise that pop stardom can be just as much a matter of proper instruction and assessed achievement as

a classical performing career.⁹ But whereas in the classical conservatory the learning process happens behind closed doors, as it were, as part of the ‘mystery’ of the musical craft, in pop music it has become part of the public process of star-making itself.

For rock ideologues reality TV pop shows are despicable for this very reason. Here we can see that pop is just as a matter of commercial artifice, has nothing to do with the authentic musical expression of emotions and ideas. In the rock, jazz and folk worlds, the amateur/professional divide may be blurred, but other distinctions do matter—between the talented and the talentless, between those who have paid their dues and those who haven’t. ‘These days you don’t really need it’, complains Brad Paisley in his country song about the decline of musical talent, ‘Thanks to reality TV.’

I am describing a tension here between two attitudes to performance. In the classical tradition, for rock, jazz and folk fans, musical performance is valuable because it offers us access to something remarkable and unique, to genius or talent which only select individuals have (even if as a result of long years of technical training and/or dues paying). This is what I call primary performance. In the cases I’ve been describing of secondary performance the pleasure on offer is quite different. Here what matters is not the performance as such but the process of becoming a performer, and failure is as interesting—as entertaining—as success. The ordinariness of the performers, their lack of credentials or charisma, is here essential. Rob Drew describes the hostility of karaoke audiences in US bars to performers who are thought to be moonlighting professionals. (Drew, 2001, pp. 121-2) The 2006 run of *X Factor* had to dump competitors who, scandalously, turned out already to be on agents’ books.

Conclusion: what is performance for?

I will end by posing a new question. Why do people want to be performers? How can we explain the popularity of karaoke, the vast number of applicants for *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*, the continued pull of conservatories and stage schools (even though the vast majority of their graduates will not make a living from performing)? In asking this question I am reversing the familiar academic use of ‘performance’ as a metaphorical description of social identity and instead wondering what ‘being a performer’ means as a social role. What is its function for society?

My answer is this. Over the last hundred years or so, for both cultural and technological reasons, the Western experience of music has been individualised (this is the sociological argument underlying the predicted decline of the performance sector). Music is now tied up with people’s sense of self. Listening to music has become a way of laying claim to one’s

9 The Brit School’s most successful graduates so far are Katie Melua and Amy Winehouse.

own physical and emotional space. We therefore make both a new demand on music (to meet our personal needs) and a new commitment to it, as a symbol of our individuality.¹⁰

This egocentric and essentially lonely aesthetic is shaped, though, by an equally passionate drive to *share* our musical tastes. Music has become more important too for our social intercourse, in gift relations and the understanding of collective identities, to intimacy and our reading of our own and other people's feelings. Live musical performance matters, then, for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a public celebration of musical commitment, a deeply pleasurable event at which our understanding of ourselves through music is socially recognised. On the other hand, it is a site in which to explore—for ourselves—how performance works. And, of course, where there are social desires, there will be entrepreneurs—promoters, ready, at a price, to meet them.

[This paper draws on work in progress on the live music sector with Martin Cloonan and John Williamson.]

10 For an important critical view of these developments see Hesmondhalgh (2007).

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