

MUSIC VIEW

MUSIC VIEW; The LP: A Crayon For the Mind

By Bernard Holland
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CURIOSITY AND A NEWLY ACQUIRED compact disk sent me to the cellar storeroom a few days ago. Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloe" was one of the first records I ever owned, and I can still remember, some 40 years later, my amazement at the beauty of that sound. My new CD, chock-full of sonic information, has jogged that memory. Its digital spit and polish knock me out of my seat. One almost hears valves clicking as the flute parts sing away.

Listening to my ancient long-playing record -- filed under nostalgia and long since packed away -- I can barely hear a thing. The brass must be in another room, the door closed. The violins have blankets over their heads. I loved that old record. It opened up sounds for me that in provincial Virginia one could barely have imagined. It roared and glittered in 1953. In 1994, it mumbles.

My spanking new CD sounds wonderful. It sounds in fact just the way I thought my old LP sounded when I bought it 40-odd years ago. How can this be? The LP conveyed many fewer sounds, and yet the missing information somehow managed to arrive in my ears. Aside from a few details, the new impression does not revise the old one. Nor has the new one taught me significantly more about "Daphnis et Chloe."

The arithmetic doesn't make sense. Multitudinous musical facts, captured and transferred to CD, ought to add up to more musical experience than those creaking 33 1/3 revolutions per minute could ever provide. For some reason, that doesn't happen. Something must have been added to the first experience to make it sound so good 40 years ago, and something taken away to make it sound so bad a few days back.

Since the old LP hasn't changed, the difference is me. Here is a listener who once manufactured, independently and inside himself, something he is unwilling or unable to manufacture today. Call it imagination or invention. Call it an act of faith or the powers of suggestion. At any rate, and without my knowing it, my ears were working harder 40 years ago. Listening was more fill-in-the-blanks, more like a coloring book for the ears with mental crayons.

Medieval men and women, historians tell us, had prodigious memories. Failing pocket calculators, file cabinets or even literacy, their imaginations worked better than ours. They had to. Records had to be kept, poems remembered, sums added. This was the kind of manual labor that Gutenberg and MS-DOS render superfluous. If we engage in it now, it is in the same spirit with which we ride exercise bikes that have no destination or lift weights in a gym.

Think of this LP-CD experience as an interior and an exterior force, the two standing in tension. The information out there (our CD brimming with sound data) is ours for the taking; the LP needs help (from the mental resources within us). The tension seems to grow as we invent more devices to do our working and thinking for us. As a result, the brain muscles we once had to have are not that important anymore. Recording technology is a small example of this: it tells us more these days and so makes the listening effort easier. Not necessarily a bad thing.

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Indeed, the above is neither a jeremiad against technology nor a suggestion that inadequate information should win out over the vast stores of knowledge now available to every ear. It simply restates a mysterious and pervasive law of equilibrium: the principle of price paid for value received, the acts of giving and taking away.

The loss can be well worth our new lack of inner effort; each new machine-driven scientific explosion tells us so. There is a downside here: consider, for example, Broadway's amplification of musicals. Stephen Sondheim once told me that as a young man he leaned over from top balconies and listened for all he was worth. Today, he is glad he had to. Current Broadwaygoers don't. They are overwhelmed with facts electronically bloated and deafeningly conveyed. No need to strain at all.

Realism is a funny idea, because a big hunk of it is invented by our minds. Record companies make us think that it is they who are putting in all this added reality, piling on digital fact after digital fact. Listeners may have been accomplishing much the same thing internally long before digital or any other technology came along.

The new sounds are wonderful. They are not the reality they are advertised to be, but they have a cold, revealing magnificence. They make hearing the right thing a lot easier than it used to be, and we should be grateful; a little worried, too. The reason my old LP sounds so bad to me today may also be the reason multiplying numbers in my head has turned into such a chore. Why bother with all that head-scratching when a dime-store calculator does it better?

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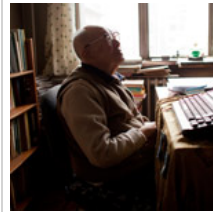


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