

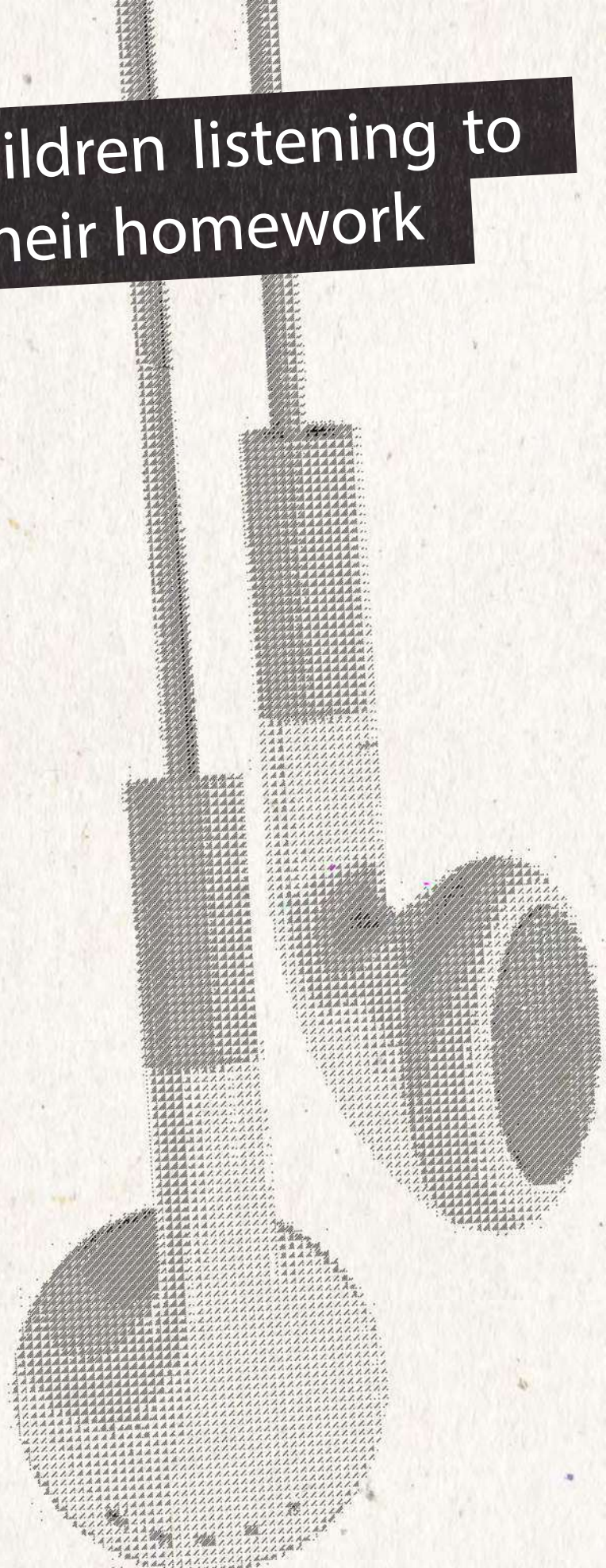
On watching my children listening to music while doing their homework

Keith Kahn-Harris

One of the unexpected pleasures of parenthood for me has been watching my children doing their homework. That's partly through relief that they are doing it at all, but it's also because I love to see them focusing, earnestly, on one thing. At the same time, part of them is elsewhere. Both my kids (a boy of 15 and a girl of 12) are nearly always plugged into their phones while working.

In those moments of contemplating my children, I am invariably brought back to my own youth, my own after-school labour. Music was part of my homework time too. Yet amidst the identification, there is also a sense of difference. I wonder, what sounds are they paying attention to? What sounds distract them, and what sounds do they ignore?

In the post-war period, popular music became inextricably linked with questions about generational difference. In recent decades though, the close association of popular music and 'youth' has increasingly been challenged in popular music studies, in part because of increasing attention to aging fans and musicians.¹



In my own research on extreme metal, it was clear from the outset that I was dealing with a multi-generational scene. So prior to having children I had good reason to think that mine would be the generation that consigned the musical 'generation gap' to history. Certainly, there was no chance that my children could shock or outrage me with their favourite music. Not only do I love extreme metal, noise and all sorts of other sonic outrages, I can also appreciate mainstream pop. All my bases were, seemingly, covered.

As it turned out, my children appear to be chips off the old block. They love metal, albeit not (yet) the more out-there kinds, and they also love to watch the Eurovision song contest. Taste-wise, there is no generation gap between us.

Taste, though, is not all there is to music. There is much that divides my children and I, not so much in *what* we listen to but in *how* we listen to it. There are sources of musical pleasure – as well as musical frustration – that they will never fully experience and that were intrinsic parts of my own history as a listener. These concern an important variable in the experience of music: *choice*.

The idea that music is something that we can choose to engage with – what kind of music, how to listen to it, when to listen to it and where to listen to it – is so taken-for-granted today that it is easy to forget how modern and culturally-specific it is. Musical choice is closely linked to musical *taste*, something that might feel 'natural' and inevitable, but also has a less-than-natural history.

One of the great projects of contemporary critical theory has been to reveal how tastes and aesthetics are never innocent, never simply the product of the free choice of autonomous individuals. While such processes are never entirely deterministic, the social dimension of taste is so deeply embedded in who we are, that we usually forget that it is even there. Such arguments are now commonplace for anyone in the humanities and social sciences, and they have a life outside of academia as well. But seeing taste as socially determined, wholly or partially, itself depends on its own commonplace and unexamined assumptions. Most importantly, if there is to be taste at all, there must be options from which to *choose*.

1. See for example: Andy Bennett, *Music, Style, and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully?* (Temple University Press, 2013); Dave Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," *Journal Of Youth Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 21–40.

In most (but by no means all) societies in the world today, we can choose between favourite genres, favourite songs and favourite artists. Of course, societies may differ in how constrained this choice might be, and certainly they differ in how far taste is connected to distinctions in status and power. But there is usually more than one form of music available. Music is never 'just music'; it is always generically qualified, atomised into artists, styles and works.

While music has never been homogeneous, the musical choices available to, say, a Mesopotamian farmer 4000 years ago or a French peasant in the Middle Ages would have been highly limited. A gap between the music available to elites and non-elites may be common to many societies in history where such elites have existed. Even in some egalitarian, non-agrarian societies, specialists in music-making also exist, and different sorts of music may be played at different occasions. Yet in western modernity the process of differentiation between musical genres has proceeded at increasing speed, as has the use of music to articulate an increasingly complex range of differences and bolster both

collective and individual identities. Music is never just organised sound. Indeed, the same sounds can mean radically different things in different places: heavy metal in Finland has become a marker of national identity; heavy metal in Saudia Arabia is a marker of underground defiance of an oppressive state.

There is an odd paradox though: this musical splintering, this explosion of choice, has occurred at the same time as the growing penetration of music that we have *no choice* but to listen to. This is, of course, in part a consequence of technological change. Amplification, together with recording and broadcasting technologies, enable music to travel, to intrude and even – literally – to deafen, as never before. I am referring here to 'ubiquitous music'; the music we hear in cafes, in taxis, in shops and in workplaces. Ubiquitous has become the preferred term in scholarship rather than 'background music' as it doesn't presume in advance that this music will stay in the background.² Indeed, the degree and type of attention paid to ubiquitous music is a complex question.

Ubiquitous music usually involves an absence of choice, although that

2. For example: *Anahid Kassabian, Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

doesn't necessarily follow that ubiquity is produced intentionally. Loud songs from a next-door party bleeding through the wall or heavy bass thumping from a passing car do not necessarily invade our sonic space as the result of a deliberate decision to do so (although music can also be used intentionally to annoy). Conversely, we shouldn't assume that unintentionally ubiquitous music is always unwanted. It is perfectly possible for someone sitting near a boombox on the beach to be happy to be subjected to its sounds if the playlist is a congenial one.

More often though, music becomes ubiquitous as a result of deliberate, carefully thought-through choices. Shops and restaurants may deliberate carefully to select a musical 'policy' in order to create a certain ambience that may facilitate consumers opening their wallets more freely. Factories have, for decades, used music to ensure workers are more contented and more productive. Oppressive regimes may also use ubiquitous musics to cow the populace, to batter them down with propaganda (North Korea, for example, makes use of public PA systems that surround workers with 'uplifting' sounds).

However much those who deliberately make music ubiquitous might aim to produce certain effects in their involuntary listeners, there are never any guarantees. We might consider ubiquitous music as an unstable form, positioned along two cross-cutting continua. One continuum is between the twin poles of *conscious attention* and *inattention* – the degree to which listeners consciously listen to and pay attention to what they are hearing. The other continuum is between the poles of musical sounds that are *repellent* and those that are *attractive*. The balance between these twin polarities is a difficult one to achieve. It is not in the interests of the retail chain that the music in their shops commands too much attention; that it is either repellent to the point that it forces customers to flee or so attractive that the business of consumption is forgotten altogether. Nor is it in their interests that music attracts so little attention that it fails to achieve its desired purpose. Rather, it needs to exist in a strange netherland that is simultaneously attention-grabbing and unhearable, attractive but not too much. Deliberately ubiquitous music ideally *distracts without being distracting*.

Those who programme ubiquitous music are rarely interested in its impact outside the setting in which it is to be heard. Yet the choices they make can have far-reaching aesthetic consequences. Ubiquitous musics can be reframed as a kind of sonic buffet, a smorgasbord of sounds. They offer up multiple possibilities for aesthetic experience, some of which can subvert the intentions of those who design them. It is through ubiquitous musics that a range of genres are presented to us, as a kind of showcase that can be developed by the listener into taste.

There is a delicious irony in the music of no choice being central to the cultivation of musical taste. My own musical biography bears witness to this. As a boy I remember the thrill of hearing Jilted John's eponymous novelty hit in a local Turkish restaurant. As a teenager I remember the life-changing excitement of being exposed to Metallica's 'Master of the Puppets' in a West End store. And I remember the prejudices engrained in me by the music I had no choice but to listen to: my assumption, unknowingly cultivated in British Chinese restaurants, that Chinese pop music is nothing more than a dull succession of ballads took years to unlearn.

Radio is one of the pre-eminent channels of ubiquitous music. In shops, in cars, on public transport and in my own home, radio played a crucial role in my musical education. It covered all the points on the continua I've identified. Sometimes I made a choice to listen to a music station, sometimes it was a choice imposed on me. Either way, radio listening has always involved a frustrating process of *waiting*: the constant hope that something I might like will be played sometime soon. As a boy with a burgeoning curiosity about metal and hard rock, I lived for the occasional bursts of heaviness from the radio. The near-certainty that I would not like most of what I would hear most of the time made the rare bursts of excitement all the sweeter.

Radio also meant serendipity and surprise. It was BBC Radio One's John Peel show that exposed me to the delights of Zimbabwean music, that shocked me with the grindcore blast of Napalm Death. Other DJs were also responsible for the life-changing moments when I first heard New Order's 'Blue Monday' and Grandmaster Flash's 'The Message'. Radio presented options to me that I could then explore in more detail; I would take public sounds and turn them into private possessions. Through trips to the local

record store and through taping records from friends, my own collection grew. With that growth came more choice, more ability to shape my own sonic environment to my will and less need to rely on ubiquitous music.

Radio is still around, still a source of musical ubiquity and it still exposes us to new possibilities for musical choice. But its centrality in shaping musical taste is on the wane. With a proliferation of new stations that 'narrowcast' tastes into smaller and more coherent chunks, the listener is less likely to hear a range of different musical styles. Furthermore, the radio is no longer the only source of 'free' music. In my youth I was dependent on radio for years as my private collection grew slowly and expensively – the only way I could have narrowcasted myself was to have listened to my small canon endlessly to the point of boredom.

I certainly don't resent my children's ability to discover music from the online jukebox. They aren't passive listeners, they are engaged in a constant process of discovery. How gratifying it was when I found my son listening to At The Gates's *Slaughter of the Soul*, a death metal favourite of

mine from 1995, an album that he 'discovered' independently of me! But maybe they are missing something too: a muscle that has never been fully formed, a capacity for sonic endurance that they have never developed.

I noticed this recently at a Bat Mitzvah party we attended as a family. There was a disco, with a playlist of pop hits from the current Top 40. Despite having plenty of friends at the party, and despite enjoying dancing, my daughter stood stock-still in the centre of the dance floor with a peeved expression on her face. Part of this, no doubt, was due to an early blooming of the arrogance of the adolescent subculturalist – nothing new there – but there was also an air of bewilderment: she doesn't usually have to endure pop tunes at all. My daughter has grown up in a world in which unchosen exposure to music is a much less common experience than it was for earlier generations. She has not learned how to live with this experience, much less to appreciate its elusive pleasures. Like my children today, I too listened to music while completing school work. It was only during my A-level and then undergraduate work that I lost the habit. As work became more intellectually involving and the stakes of success or failure became higher, so I

felt I needed to dedicate my full attention to it. I listened while I worked at a time when my record/tape/CD collection was small. BBC Radio One was my station of choice (not that there was a great deal of choice in the 1980s) and, during homework-time, it pumped out solidly mainstream fare. This was perfect music to work to. Some songs I enjoyed, some I hated, but most I was indifferent to. In this way, music zoned in and out of attention, rarely pulling me away from my work for more than 3-4 minutes at a time. The volume of my stereo (I didn't listen through earphones) was set at precisely the right level for this liminal point between attention and distraction – loud enough to listen properly when I wanted, soft enough to fit in with the background soundscape of my house and the scratching of my pen.

My children don't listen to the radio while they work. Over the last couple of years, they have built up substantial Spotify playlists and it is these that dominate their homework time. For my son, it's a list dominated by Swedish power metallers Sabbaton, the Viking metal band Amon Amarth, some Iron Maiden and a sprinkling of death metal. For my daughter, Scottish pirate metallers Alestorm and Finnish folk metal dominate, leavened by a

pinch of Metallica. I'm sure any parent would agree that this is a laudable musical diet for the modern adolescent, but it's also a pretty narrow one. Spotify's algorithms mean that their tastes are becoming ever-more focused and streamlined. Like Sabbaton? Try Powerwolf. Like Powerwolf? Try Battlebeast.

As the algorithm marches my children towards a perfected telos of taste, an ur-playlist that encapsulates everything that they could ever possibly like, so they are released from the chore of having to zone out and tolerate the musically unlovable. When their music accompanies their homework, how do they achieve that liminal state of simultaneous (non)distraction/(non)attention that allowed me to reconcile my own listening with work?

Well, maybe they don't. Maybe listening to music they love while doing homework is impairing their academic learning. Alternatively, maybe their ability to create a more perfect sonic bubble for themselves is changing what it means for them to 'love' music. When the music that I loved appeared as an occasional nugget in a morass of mediocre sounds, it might have created an intensity that my children's generation will never know. That they listen to

their 'favourite' music while doing homework may not matter so much if their favourite music lacks the aura it once did.

Maybe, maybe, maybe... No one yet knows whether algorithmically - sharpened infinite choice will change the nature of music experience permanently and irrevocably. My children are at the sharp end of a historic experiment, an experiment so novel that it would be premature to offer firm conclusions. Now is a time for conjecture, maybe for concern and certainly for curiosity. That eerie sense of simultaneous similarity and difference that parents experience when observing their children can be a starting point from which to speculate about historical novelty and stasis, innovation and continuity. It can also be a starting point to think about new possibilities for musical pleasure and agency.

I end, therefore, with one such possibility. In his classic work *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer, spoke of the need for 'ear cleaning'; a deliberate practice of attention to the background noisiness of modern life.³ Perhaps a generation raised in their

own chosen sonic environments, without the stoic ability to 'listen through' unwanted music, will be able to hear things that my own generation can't. Unchosen ubiquitous music and ubiquitous sound – whether welcome or unwelcome – may in the future command attention in a way it didn't before. That attention could be the basis for new debates and fresh perspectives on a perennial question: what do we want the world to sound like?

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3. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Knopf, 1977).