



REVIEW | The Musicology of Record Production

Simon Zagorski-Thomas

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014

ISBN: 9780521075641

Peter Elsdon

University of Hull

p.s.elsdon@hull.ac.uk

The development of a branch of musicology devoted to record production has been something with which Simon Zagorski-Thomas has been closely associated. As the co-founder of the *Journal of the Art of Record Production*, an offspring of a series of conferences now in their 11th year, and as the co-editor of a previous volume, with Simon Frith, titled *The Art of Record Production: An Introductory Reader for a New Academic Field*, the publication under review here is in many ways the culmination of those endeavours.

The title of this volume prompts one immediate question: is the musicology of record production a distinct discipline in its own right? When Zagorski-Thomas quotes Allan Moore's remark that it makes no sense to identify a musicology of record production as distinct from, for example, a musicology of harmony or of singing, he does so in order to set out to, "incorporate record production into the body of musicology rather than establish it as a separate subject" (26). At the same time, his rationale is that the adoption of recording as the de facto standard for the creation and consumption of music marks a shift that has not been reflected in musicology. Certainly, it is true that musicology has tended to treat the recording as a text, without fully thinking through the complexity of the processes that bring that text into being.

What emerges over the course of the book is a sustained evaluation of a range of issues and conceptual frameworks. It is, the author suggests, "a book that seeks

to elaborate the nature of the academic subject itself rather than one that provides an in-depth analysis of any specific features" (1). This elaboration of the subject takes place through the explication of "eight typological categories" that serve as "the broad constituent parts of this musicology of record production" (37). These are: sonic cartoons; staging; the development of audio technology; using technology; training; communication and practice; performance in the studio; aesthetics and consumer influence; and the business of record production. That list taken by itself indicates the sheer breadth of what the book attempts to cover. As Zagorski-Thomas emphasizes, the relationships and overlaps between these categories are just as important as each one in itself. And reading through the book's treatment of these themes, it becomes clear that this is much less a toolkit for studying record production, and more an extended meditation on related topics that return again and again in different contexts.

Over the course of the book's journey through these ideas, the author assembles what he refers to as a kind of theoretical model. This draws on actor-network theory (ANT), the social construction of technology (SCOT), and ideas from dramaturgy, ecological theory, and a variety of other sources. In reality, this feels less like a model, and more like a series of different perspectives on some central questions. The reason is that record production emerges from this text as an immensely rich and complex practice that demands examination from a range of different angles. It is a practice that deals with (amongst other things) performance, organizing timbres across a stereo plane (the "staging", as he discusses), and mediating between notions of real acoustic space and the virtual spaces that recording creates. It is also a practice that is inherently collaborative. Zagorski-Thomas suggests that musicology has tended to be in thrall to the romanticized notion of the artist as lone genius, ignoring the fact that "[a]ll music-making – and record production is no exception – is a collaborative activity" (105). A later chapter clarifies this further to anyone unfamiliar with the kinds of negotiations that occur during recording sessions. This account draws both on his own extensive experience in the field, and examples from other recording sessions, some very well known, others not, and serves to emphasize the complexity of the relationships and structures at work in music recording.

In addition to dealing with the collaborative nature of making records, there is also the question of the technology used. One of the contributions of this volume is to draw out, via theorists like Bruno Latour, an understanding of how technology is not simply a concrete artefact, but an actor within the networks that involve the making of records. As Zagorski-Thomas puts it, drawing on Latour, "the socially constructed nature of technological objects means that they should be treated in a similar way to human participants" (151). He sees these technologies as embodying "affordances that are the result of a deliberate process of configuration" (151), as demonstrated, for example, through the discussion of the different accounts of the eight-track recording technology developed by Ross Snyder and made famous by Les Paul (101-102, 106-108).

The gap that has opened up between the discourse of musicology and the realities of how records are made is one that certainly needs to be bridged. It is paralleled by another gap that the author touches on, namely the way that the incorporation of music technology into degree programmes in the United

Kingdom has tended to focus on a traditional practice-based model – learning how to use equipment and what to do with it – at the expense of theory, which he describes as “patchy and incoherent” (167). Indeed, these two things seem related. As with the crude division implied by the adage “those who can do, those who can’t teach”, musicology has too often been seen as divorced from the practical realities of music-making (even if this is far from the truth). As someone who is both practitioner and theorist, Zagorski-Thomas is able to bridge that gap, and he is clear about his ambition to contribute here to the deepening of academic rigour in the way music technology and production are taught. But there are also other deeper issues that flow from this discussion, not least the division between music technology degrees with their strongly vocational emphasis, and music degree programmes that have been more traditionally associated with the discipline of musicology. This kind of division has been highlighted recently in an article by Georgina Born and Kyle Devine (2015), the result of research conducted as part of the MusDig research project. Zagorski-Thomas’ monograph should certainly prompt a wider debate about the nature of this division and its consequences.

There is also, for this reader at least, a broader issue about how musicology might adapt to the challenge Zagorski-Thomas poses. Like any musical discipline, it requires specific specialist knowledge in order to be able to talk about record production. I can, for example, talk about a sound on a record in general terms of its character and timbre, but it requires rather more expertise to describe (or speculate on) the technological means by which that sound comes to be that way. It requires experience of using professional equipment: not just for a few hours at a time, but far more extensively. Sometimes specific knowledge of how records are made is only in the possession of the individual intimately involved in their processes. In contrast to the score, where we find an itemizing of the techniques and gestures that go toward creating the music in performance, the recording lacks this trace. When Zagorski-Thomas quotes an anecdote about the making of Britney Spear’s single “Oops!... I Did It Again”, we are only made the wiser because one of the participants has chosen to reveal something that could easily have been kept secret (49). Because of its emphasis on exploring the processes of record production, this publication has relatively little to say about how a traditionally based musicology might engage with recordings in terms of specific production processes. But perhaps that will always be a specific constraint that characterizes this field. And this book does do much to point to some directions that might help to place the record production within a broader musicological discourse.

Overall then, Zagorski-Thomas carves out a space for a discussion that, while taking record production as its focus, opens out into a whole wealth of important areas. In doing so it poses a challenge to how we think about recordings, and how we think about teaching the skills associated with record production.

Reference

- Born, G., and Devine, K. 2015. "Music Technology, Gender, and Class: Digitization, Educational and Social Change in Britain". *Twentieth Century Music* 12: 135-172.