

# Re-performing Everyday Life Through Music

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## ABSTRACT

Mobile music listening is a popular research topic and has been studied from various different angles. Drawing on interviews and shadowing sessions with 11 participants this paper seeks to show how mobile music listening behaviour helps to re-perform everyday life. The focus here is on three different definitions of performance: as self-presentation, as a Musical Event, and as self-management. Through examples from the study it will be demonstrated that mobile music listening can be understood as performance according to all these definitions. It gives support in everyday life, thereby re-performing it.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Music in everyday life is a popular research topic that has been investigated in different contexts, e.g. well-being (Skanland, 2012), urban soundscapes (Atkinson, 2007), in the office (Dibben & Haake, 2013), as motivation for athletes (Laukka & Quick, 2013), and many others.

One particular focus was and still is on mobile music, which has been studied from the use of the Walkman (Hosokawa, 1984; Bull, 2000) and iPod (Bull, 2006) to the wide variety of devices that can be seen in the streets nowadays (Goldenbeld et al., 2012; Krause et al., 2015). Much has been written about the different purposes mobile music listening can serve for the user, but this is not the space to recapitulate it all. Instead this article is going to address one specific aspect of it, namely how listeners use their portable listening devices to re-perform their everyday life. However, clarification about the way performance can be understood is necessary in order to approach this topic.

One way of understanding performance is as self-presentation, as conveying an impression (Goffman, 1956). Goffman himself defines performance as follows: "A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (ibid., p. 7). He does not talk about music here, but it may very well be used in this context, too. Mobile listening devices, for example, can be used as a signal to other people in the streets showing that you are busy and do not want to be interrupted (Bull, 2007; Garner, 2012). Additionally, they can be used as fashion accessories (Griffiths & Cubitt, 2011) and indicators of the user's musical identity (Krause & North, 2014).

The immediate association that comes into mind when hearing the word "performance" is something that can be seen on a stage; something that is prepared for the purpose of being observed by an audience, whether it is a musical or a theatrical performance or something related to it. Of course portable listening devices could be used in these circumstances, e.g. in flash mobs where participants receive instructions through their devices, carry them out together and then can be watched in a video on the internet (see for

example Improv Everywhere, 2010). Nevertheless, this is not a common occurrence for every user in their day-to-day life.

**TIME 1 – Before the Event** (All prior history as meaningful to A. Actor(s))

### 1. Preconditions

Conventions, biographical associations, previous programming practices

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**TIME 2 – During the Event** (the event may be of any duration, seconds to years)

### 2. Features of the Event

**A Actor(s)** Who is engaging with music? (e.g., analyst, audience, listener, performer, composer, programmer)

**B Music** What music, and with what significance as imputed by Actor(s)?

**C Act of Engagement with music** What is being done? (e.g., individual act of listening, responding to music, performing, composing)

**D Local conditions of C.** (e.g., how came to engage with music in *this* way, at *this* time (i.e., at Time 2 – 'During the Event'))

**E Environment** In what setting does engagement with music take place? (material cultural features, interpretive frames provided on site (e.g., programme notes, comments of other listeners))

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**TIME 3 – After the Event**

**3. Outcome** Has engagement with music afforded anything? What if anything was changed or achieved or made possible by this engagement? And has this process altered any aspect of item 1 above?

**Figure 1. The Musical Event and its conditions (DeNora, 2003, p. 49)**

It is, however, possible to adapt the chronology of a performance understood this way to everyday musical events, as DeNora (2003) does. She defines "The Musical Event" as "indicative scheme for how we might begin to situate music as it is mobilised in action and as it is associated with social effects" (ibid., p. 49). The Musical Event is made up of three different times (see Fig. 1), specifically Before, During and After the Event, with all the processes and information these times include. The focus here is on the actor and their use of and engagement with the music and not on one specific listening condition or device as it has been in various studies concerning mobile music listening (e.g., Bull, 2006; Wiredu, 2007). Since the word "portable" in portable listening device implies that the device is not fixed in one place but can be

used in changing environments, this scheme suggested here is very useful to study and understand more about mobile music listening as it is adaptable to different environments and conditions.

Performance can also be seen as management, since the performance of self corresponds with self-regulation. DeNora (2000) discovered that music listeners are purposeful agents who know exactly what they need at a given time and select the appropriate music to manage their emotions and themselves. She writes that “music is a device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives” (ibid., p. 62). Music can be employed for the presentation of the self to others (see again Goffman, 1956) and to oneself (DeNora, 2000), the latter to see the self more clearly and discover the state of one's identity. This performance of the self can happen at any time and place where music is available, which makes mobile music listening an interesting practice to examine, since it happens in a changing environment and is not bound to certain times either. Mobile music listening has been studied in relation to self-regulation before, especially with regards to emotion management (e.g., Greasley & Lamont, 2011) or control of one's private space (e.g. Bull, 2007).

In this article I will demonstrate how all of these different interpretations of performance can be found in participant's own descriptions of their mobile music listening experiences, building on research I carried out for my doctoral thesis.

## II. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The study on which this article is based was carried out between late 2015 and early 2016 in a small city in England. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Exeter. Eleven mobile music listeners between the age of 20 and 42 were recruited through word-of-mouth and snowballing. Each of them took part in a semi-structured interview about their music listening behaviour with the focus on mobile music listening.

Several days later the second part of the study took place. For this I met with the participant again and followed them while they demonstrated their usual mobile listening behaviour. Pictures were taken of the environment, and the participant was approached occasionally to shortly talk about their choice of music at that moment in time. This method was adapted from DeNora's (2000) “shadowing”, where the researcher followed the participant while both carried audio recorders and spoke their impressions and thoughts aloud while walking through the city. In the current study this particular method was used to check the validity of the answers the participant had given in the first interview, to understand what exactly the participant is doing during mobile music listening, and to check for anything that was not mentioned during the interview.

Since talking would interfere with the music listening experience, the amount of interruption by the researcher during the shadowing was limited to the bare minimum. For that reason a second interview was carried out immediately afterwards in order to discuss anything that was observed and experienced in more detail.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the process of mobile music listening in more depth, especially concerning the factors that influence the choice of music and how particular music helps achieve the effects that were discovered in previous studies. As part of this exploratory study questions were asked about the participant's musical preferences, the structure and amount of music on their portable listening devices, their reasons for using those devices, and the situations they encounter in their everyday music listening.

For reasons of validity all of the participants were asked whether they thought that the behaviour they displayed in front of the researcher would be the same they show in everyday life. All of them agreed that the overall impression I got during the shadowing was a good representation of their normal music listening behaviour, even though some of them adapted their pace or mode of transportation, or said that they would not normally walk in the city at this time of day.

The interviews were coded and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with the help of NVivo. All of the names mentioned here are pseudonyms.

## III. RE-PERFORMING EVERYDAY LIFE

At the beginning of this article three different definitions of performance were given, namely performance as self-presentation, as a chronology, and as management. For the purpose of clarity they are going to be treated as separate interpretations here, while they might actually overlap or be difficult to distinguish when observed in real-life.

The word “re-performing” is used instead of “performing”, since music is often something that can be understood as helping with the mundane task that is actually done, and not the task itself. For example, commuting to work might be the task that needs to be “performed” and music assists in creating a more enjoyable experience out of it, thereby re-performing this everyday reality. Or to use Bull's (2005) words: “iPods [author's note: insert the word “music“ here instead] are used both as a mundane accompaniment to the everyday and as a way of aestheticizing and controlling that very experience. In doing so the iPod [see above] reorganises the user's relation to space and place” (ibid., p. 350).

### A. Performance as Conveying an Impression

One aspect all of the participants agreed on is that it is rude to listen to music over headphones when in the company of a friend and not engaged in an activity like running together. Although Goffman's (1956) definition states that self-presentation is an activity that is done to influence someone else, this example might still apply to this definition, since it means consciously not doing something in order not to convey the wrong impression. Here is how Hayley expresses it:

*I would think that would be quite rude. It would be like - ok, we are walking together, but I'm going to ignore you and listen to my music.*

Another part of mobile music listening that is considered rude by most of the participants is to turn up the volume to such a level that passersby can hear it. Not only would that disturb other people, especially when it does not correspond with their musical preferences, but it would also enable others

to judge the listener on their musical taste and might cause possible embarrassment, which is exactly what everyone tries to avoid, according to Goffman (1956). These are the reasons why Koko no longer listens to his music through speakers in public places, as he did as a child:

*Don't know. Like sound pollution. Like maybe people don't like the music I'm listening to and I don't want to, you know, wanna be judged or it's not like, I don't think people would judge me, because I listen with what normally every person of my age would listen.*

Anne would sometimes like to sing along to the songs she likes, but this would cause embarrassment in public. Her alternative is the following:

*I like to mouth (laughs) because I'm not singing so nobody's going to look around. They're just going to look past me and go - what? What's going on? - and chances are I'll never have to see them again and be confronted about it (laughs).*

Apart from trying not to strike undue attention in public and not being rude to friends, there are situations where it is necessary to interact with strangers even during mobile music listening, e.g. in shops at the counter or with the shop owner when being the only customer. Most interviewees would turn off their music or take off their headset in order to demonstrate that they are available for conversation, and to hear what the cashier has to say. Only two of the participants mentioned that they prefer self-checkout if available, so they do not have to interrupt their music listening experience.

Headphones can also be used to convey an impression of being busy (see also Bull, 2007), which to some participants was more socially acceptable than being rude and ignoring someone:

*Sometimes when you've got your headphones on, you know that noone will come and speak with you, because there is you kind of you got a shield and you're like - I'm on my own. Don't talk to me. But in a nice way. And when you haven't got your headphones on, you kind of, you haven't got any defence around you. (Jane)*

To summarise, mobile music listening can be used to “perform” in the presence of other people, to give the desired impression. The listeners I interviewed were all very conscious of the privatising aspect of using portable listening devices (Bull, 2007) and had different strategies of overcoming possible negative reactions of others.

## **B. Performance as The Musical Event**

For the purpose of this paper I am going to show what mobile music listening as a Musical Event would look like using the example of Max, a 42-year old participant who is very tech savvy.

Before the Event, in his case, includes all the preparation that is necessary to make mobile music listening possible. This includes creating a playlist of music he wants to listen to while commuting:

*I create playlists where I select the music that I currently like the most, the songs that I like the most and I tap them as loved and then I create the filter in iTunes where all the songs that I love become in that playlist and I shuffle that playlist.*

Additionally, he listens out for new music during the weekend and adds it to the playlist if he comes across something he likes. Part of the preparation is also to make sure that his devices are in working order:

*I have to go with the train for two hours, then I make sure my battery is full or that I bring my charger and actually I'm a bit panicky about that stuff. So I always end up making sure I book a flight or a seat that is next to a power socket so that I can keep charging my iPod and I have an iPad as well.*

He also bought his devices specifically for the purpose of helping him listen to music while commuting, e.g. he wants to be able to skip music while cycling without having to stop, so he bought headphones with remote control features or uses his Apple Watch in summer, when it is not covered by his sleeve. With all this preparation completed, he can go out and listen to music through his portable listening devices.

During the Event there is Max, the actor. He produces his own music in his leisure time, but in the music listening situation he is mainly a listener. However, while he is in the situation he also prepares the next Musical Event by marking the songs he loves for a new playlist, as mentioned in the first quote, and could therefore be called an analyst, too.

The second Feature of the Event is music. Max' likes to listen to “Alternative 80s and synthesizer music”, e.g. “Depeche Mode, Cure, ...”. When he listens to music, his goal is the following:

*And I just I wanna go back to the essence of what music was all about and that's expressing your feelings. And I need to hear that in both the melodies and in the lyrics.*

The Act of Engagement with music is the logical conclusion of Max' roles as the actor, as a listener and analyst. The Local conditions of this Act of Engagement are mostly influenced by the activity that is done during the mobile music listening. When Max cycles he needs to control his playlist through his headphones or Apple Watch, while he can use his iPhone for the same purpose when he walks. One of his reasons for listening to music is that he prefers “listening to music than to [his] surroundings”. Nevertheless, he says the reason he hardly ever goes out of the house without his portable listening devices is this:

*I think it part of it is also habit, that I just don't got out without putting my headphones in, so... And, yeah, music is just really prominent, I don't know, in my life.*

The environment surrounding this particular engagement with music is mostly outside. Max explains that the only time he does not listen to music outside is when he goes there for the purpose of going outside, e.g. a walk in the countryside. But since he commutes most of the time, this is often accompanied by music. To the question whether there is anything in his environment that influences his choice of music, he says that this is not the case. Instead he describes his relationship with music as one of mutual emotional influence, i.e. he either chooses music because of his mood or changes his mood because of the next song on his shuffled playlist.

For Max the Outcome of this engagement with music is the equivalent of achieving his aims when listening to mobile music. He is able to block out unwanted sounds from his environment, manage his mood, and do something he loves (i.e. listening to music) while doing something he needs to do (i.e. commuting to work). Since music successfully helps him to achieve all this, it motivates him to engage in this kind of musical performance repeatedly.

### C. Performance as Management

As mentioned before, performance as management has been the center of several studies although it has not always been named as such. In the present study most of the participants mentioned self-regulation/management as a reason for mobile music listening, whether that is for the purpose of motivation, relaxation, emotion management, or avoiding the unwelcome state of silence, amongst others.

Motivation is often closely connected with exercising, which is one of the activities participants carry out during mobile music listening. Here, Annabel explains how music helps her when she is running:

*'Cause I do like my music to help me eh motivate me with my running. Give me energy. It energises you, music. Definitely makes a difference to your mood and your motivation levels.*

This energy appears to be created through loud and upbeat music and it helps to “speed me up”, as Cody, who also uses music while running, phrases it. Cody describes how he sometimes runs in the rhythm of the music and “when it's the tempo faster I'll just start run faster as well”. Apart from the intrinsic musical qualities and the volume it is played at, for Cody, the temporal characteristic of the music itself serves as a landmark to check his running performance. He explains:

*When I was in the third song I know - now I should be by the river - it was like telling me when if I'm running well.*

This is the equivalent to what DeNora (2000) had discovered, when she found that some participants use certain qualities of music to reflect about themselves and their emotional and physical state, although in her study it is not connected to physical exercise but identity work.

In addition to motivation, mobile music is often used to create, sustain or change a mood. Thomas, another of the participants, explained that this was one of his main reasons for listening to music. He is very aware which piece of music would cause which emotional reaction in him and therefore chooses what he wants to listen to according to the emotional aims he has in mind:

*It's more it's not about the music type as such, it's more about the memories for me. For myself. I wouldn't call a song neutral when I used to, you know, listen to it with my mum, who is not here. That causes me some, you know, like memories. Not bad memories, but I miss her. So I wouldn't want to listen to it when I go out for a party. (laughs) You know what I mean?*

Anne listens to music in order to avoid a certain emotional state. She knows from experience that certain environmental conditions will influence her mood negatively, so she listens to music in order to block out these environmental stimuli:

*You know, it's not necessarily that it's particularly unpleasant noises, it's just that it's too chaotic and it becomes distressing and it you know, I will get grumpy. (laughs)*

It seems that not only can music itself be used for emotion management, but the presence of music can help to keep external, and even internal, influences at bay, as the next example will show. Here, Thomas does not like the thoughts that develop in his head when no music is playing:

*'Cause when I don't listen to music and it's really quiet, I start to think. About anything. About this car (laughs) or this why is this happening, why is that. And I don't want this, 'cause it's really tiring my brain.*

It is not any particular quality of the music he is listening to, but the mere presence of music that helps with this particular kind of self-performance. Of course, the music that is listened to can be chosen to manage emotions, too, so two purposes are served at the same time.

There are many other examples for performance as management, which cannot all be mentioned here. The examples shown here give a hint of how it is possible to re-perform certain aspects of the daily life through music.

## IV. CONCLUSION

As shown in this article, mobile music listening can be used to re-perform everyday life in several different ways, using multiple definitions of the word “performance”.

In the first instance performance can be understood as conveying an impression, which is done automatically when wearing headphones in the presence of others and needs to be adjusted occasionally in order not to convey an unwanted impression.

Additionally, performance can be seen as a sequence of occurrences, which is adaptable to any kind of musical behaviour. Through the example of one participant it was demonstrated that mobile music listening is more than can be seen in public, and that it consists of three different times (before, during, and after the event). In other words, it can be described as a Musical Event, too.

Lastly, understanding performance as management is giving a different name to something that has been the topic of many previous studies. It was illustrated here, how mobile music listening can be utilised to manage emotions and to motivate during exercise.

The main purpose of this article was to show that mobile music listening is a complex behaviour that can be investigated from many different angles. This article also gives the indication that it is necessary for clarification purposes to show exactly how “performance” is defined in a given context.

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