The Deaf Audiophile

What's so good about bad sound? Plenty

November 10, 2007; Page W14

Of all the clever inventions of the past decade, the most culturally consequential just might be the iPod. In case you've been asleep since 2001, that's Apple's proprietary name for the MP3 player, a hand-held hard drive that stores and plays the audio files used to transmit recorded sound over the Web. It's the postmodern equivalent of the Walkman, only better, since an iPod can hold as many as 40,000 songs in its digital memory. Yet these ingenious devices are driving producers and engineers nuts.

In September the Journal's Lee Gomes reported in his "Portals" column that "those who work behind-the-mic in the music industry -- producers, engineers, mixers and the like -- say they increasingly assume their recordings will be heard as MP3s on an iPod music player." Accordingly, these audio professionals are now custom-tailoring their product to sound best on iPods, the same way that pop record producers tailored their product to sound best on car radios.

The trouble with this approach, Mr. Gomes explained, is that MP3 files are highly compressed in order to make them easier to store and transmit. Thus a piece of recorded music that is loaded onto an iPod and listened to on inexpensive earbuds doesn't sound as good as the same music recorded on a CD and played back on a stereo system equipped with high-quality speakers or headphones. The result, Mr. Gomes was repeatedly told by industry professionals, is "music that is loud but harsh and flat, and thus not enjoyable for long periods of time."

True? Incontestably. As a trained musician with many years of performing experience under my belt, I'm well aware that the MP3 is, musically speaking, something of a blunt instrument. Yet I find it hard to get bent out of shape over its burgeoning ubiquity. Indeed, I spend a great deal of time listening to digital audio files on my iPod or through a pair of compact desktop speakers connected to my MacBook.

Why do I settle for inferior sound quality? Partly because of the near-miraculous convenience of MP3s, which not only can be stored and retrieved with the greatest of ease but are equally easy to purchase over the Web via services like Apple's iTunes. But I have another reason, one that I share with millions of other iPod users: I'm middle-aged.

Like a third of my fellow baby boomers, I'm experiencing one of the more predictable consequences of growing older, which is that I now suffer from a mild but noticeable case of presbycusis, the medical term for age-related hearing loss. Not only are the sensory cell receptors in my inner ear gradually degenerating as a result of advancing age, but when young I spent countless happy hours playing loud music, which fried more than a few of those same receptors. I can still enjoy music of
all kinds, but I don't hear it quite as well as I did 20 years ago, because I now find it harder to perceive the high-frequency sounds that are such an important part of recorded music.

That's the bad news. The good news is that I don't care... much. For one of the unintended consequences of presbycusis is that it liberates you from the snare and delusion of audiophilia. When I was younger, I longed for bigger, better, ever more expensive sound systems, sure that they would enhance the pleasure I took in listening to recorded music. And did they? Up to a point. But somewhere along the way I forgot that every dollar I spent on speakers was a dollar I could no longer spend on records -- not to mention tickets to live performances. Like so many sound-crazy audiophiles, I had not only put the cart before the horse, but I'd come close to cutting the reins.

Now that my hearing isn't what it used to be, I understand more clearly than ever before that recorded music can never hope to be more than a substitute for the real thing. A priceless and irreplaceable substitute, to be sure, and one that has clearly changed the world of music for the better. I've been listening to old records for most of a lifetime, yet it never quite ceases to amaze me that simply by pushing a button, I can hear Igor Stravinsky conducting "The Rite of Spring" or Louis Armstrong rapping out that golden introduction to "West End Blues." Yet the fact remains that sitting down in your living room and throwing on a CD is simply not the same thing as going to a concert, much less playing for your own pleasure. Yes, it can be intensely meaningful, but it is still experience once removed, no matter how fancy your speakers are. Conversely, Stravinsky is still Stravinsky when you experience him through a $10 pair of earbuds. He's the point, not the earbuds.

That's why I'm more than content to listen to "The Rite of Spring" on my trusty iPod. Would that my presbycusic ears were capable of distinguishing between great and good sound -- but at least they still know the infinitely more important difference between sound and silence.

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