Chapter IX
Musique Concrètization:
Music, Technology and Critical Constructivism

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ABSTRACT

For the past several years, a crisis over copyright and control of music distribution has been developing. The outcome of this crisis has tremendous implications not only for the fate of commercial and creative entities involved in music, but for the social reproduction of knowledge and culture more generally. Critical theories of technology are useful in addressing these implications. This chapter introduces the concept of "concretization" (Feenberg, 1999), and demonstrates how it can be mapped onto the field of current music technologies and the lives and work of the people using them. This reading of popular music technologies resonates strongly with themes arising out of current scholarship covering the crisis of copyright and music distribution. Reading music technology in this way can yield a lucid account of the diverse trajectories and goals inherent in heterogeneous networks of participants involved with music technologies. It can also give us not only a detailed description of the relations of various groups, individuals, and technologies involved in networks of music, but also a prescriptive program for the future maintenance and strengthening of a vibrant, perhaps less intensively commercialized, and radically democratized sphere of creative exchange.

INTRODUCTION

For the past several years, a crisis over copyright and control of music distribution has been developing. The outcome of this crisis has tremendous implications not only for the fate of commercial and creative entities involved in music, but also for the social reproduction of knowledge and culture more generally. Various branches of scholarship have recently explored some of the contours of the current crisis, variously interpreting its historical significance (Lessig, 2002, 2004), measuring its

economic impact (Leyshon, 2001; Leyshon, Webb, French, Thrift, & Crewe, 2005), and prophesizing future scenarios for the social role of music and the commercial industry structures that support and derive revenue from it.

The current crisis centers around a difficult dilemma: the prevalence of freely available technologies (audio recording software, the MP3 format, the Internet) that circumvent a traditional regime of monetized exchange of sound recordings over a wide geographical territory. The implications of this crisis are clear for those whose revenues and livelihoods are most affected by it: creators, recording companies, music publishers, and related industries (radio, television, retail, distribution, concert halls, and so on) whose revenues depend on these well-established networks of the business of music. But the crisis is making itself felt to many other parties as well. Certainly, lawsuits by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) have criminalized and heavily penalized a number of Internet users, victims of a music industry desperate to preserve its traditional value chain via costly legal instruments. Software companies working in the areas of file-sharing platforms and audio compression technologies have felt the pinch, too, having either gone underground (e.g., eDonkey, BitTottent), or having been bought lock, stock, and barrel by one or more of the Big Four (such as happened to MP3.com, Emusic, and Napster), or having been incorporated into the design and marketing of related commercial products (ITunes Music Store/IPod).

Lawrence Lessig (2004) writes about this crisis of copyright as symptomatic of a more fundamental attempt to recover what he terms "read-write culture." In Lessig's view, knowledge and culture were primarily disseminated in Western liberal democracies via "read-only" media (radio, television, cinema) during most of the twentieth century; media regimes in which consumers were technically limited in their ability to manipulate and reuse cultural artifacts to create their own art. The ability of audiences to take part in using cultural artifacts for their own ends has always been contested (as observed in the historical legal battles over the VCR and over the rights of cable television providers to rebroadcast television signals). However, never before have the rights of audiences to do so been so restricted as they are now. Ironically, this takes place at a time when computer technologies have made it easier than ever to compose, copy, remix, and share music.

But there is an additional factor to be considered: one that transforms a simple crisis of copyright and piracy into a world-shaping crisis. The set of technologies used for the production of popular music have all but converged with the set of technologies used in music's reproduction and distribution. The networked personal computer has become a highly malleable locus of the most efficient and most closely converged set of music production, reproduction, and distribution technologies in history (Ebare, 2003). While it is true that much commercial music making is still embedded in conventional networks of production (recording studios, professional audio engineers, CD manufacturing facilities, and so forth [Leyshon et al., 2005; Théberge, 1997]), the blurring of production, reproduction, and distribution technologies is potentially destabilizing to conventional conceptions of what it means to be a creator or consumer. As the distinction between musical production and consumption recedes (or perhaps the appropriate phrase is "in remission"), the utility and relevance of technologies that support this distinction ("read-only" media) also fade from use. Technologies of "read-write culture" may herald the end of culture industries altogether, or at least their radical transformation; indeed, the enactment of culture as an "industry" depends on technologies designed to divide populations into content producers and content consumers.

The claims of Lessig and others [notably Benkler (2006)], that the growth of "read-write culture" has deep implications for the reproduction

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