# The Platformization of the Sound Archive

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Sound archives are changing. In fact, they started changing in the decade of the 1980s with the impact that digitalization had on recordings, archiving management, and research. Since then, there has been a progressive digitalization of sound collections housed in institutional, commercial, and personal archives. However, digital inscription of sound does not explain everything, as it does not account by itself for the current modes of storing, distributing, and listening to sound recordings. Digital inscription is only a precondition of a new moment in the transformation of archives: its online access, i.e., entering an environment which is dominated by the use of files, hyperlinks, streaming services, virtual storing, software, tutorials, new listening devices, and many other resources and innovations –among which we can see the emergence of the controversial artificial intelligence.

In the virtual environment, the old sound archives –virtualized now– coexist with other archives: music marketing platforms. Both feed the so-called "platformization of everyday life",[1] a growing trend to process our decisions around the use of platforms. Research on music is not unfamiliar with that tendency, as day after day it forms its study corpuses with audio files housed in commercial platforms. This practice unveils an ontological transformation in the relationship between archives and users, which consists in a shift that goes from the possession of objects –digital and non-digital– to their access (Han, 2021). That is to say, the user meets the virtual archive files through the access, which, in many cases, only takes clicking on a hyperlink. Although there are exceptions, in general, users do not seem to have any interest in knowing the physical location of their files –nothing would change by knowing that– or prefer to imaginarily situate them in "the cloud": an extensively used metaphor which masks or romanticizes media capitalism voracity.

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[1] An updated and extensive analysis of this phenomenon can be found in Anke and Bauriedl (2022).

But what is attractive about music platforms for music research? And, what other consequences do their use have? The monetary drive of those platforms stimulates a constant growth of their collections. It is estimated that in 2019, SoundCloud had 200 million songs, and in 2021, Deezer, Apple Music, Tidal, Spotify, Amazon and Qobuz, had between 70 and 80 million each, the ten platforms leading the market having a total of 782 million songs.[2] This scenario has no antecedents in the history of archives and their users, as it puts millions of sound recordings in only one location –the screen– a few clicks away. But not only do the quantity and ease of access appeal to researchers but also the fact that in those reservoirs there are recordings related to the objects of study of ethnomusicology, musicology, popular music studies and other disciplines. Although this is more than evident, a few and striking examples may shed light on this statement and, above all, open the way to other questions. If we take the case of Spotify, we can see that its interface gives access to various albums of Alan Lomax with his field recordings,[3] playlists with songs belonging to Afro-American rituals –as the candomblé–,[4] and songs of qom, mapuche, and selk'nam native peoples recorded in a studio and in the field –to mention just peoples from Argentina and Chile. The presence of these recordings on a platform of music distribution which operates in accordance with a data commercialization logic, turns those recordings into commodities, whose beneficiaries are agents and companies, mediators between the creators/interpreters of those expressions and the users, who carry out marketing and music data mining work,[5] among others.

The location of those recordings in the virtual environment not only gives rise to their commercialization but to transformations of their sense and use. The presence of ritual songs of Afro-American religions and of native peoples is paradigmatic of this type of transformations. In their habitual use contexts –offline–, the circulation of several of those songs is normally restricted as they are expressions related to initiation processes, representations of non-human beings, or of exclusive use by religious leaders. But accessible on commercial platforms, the songs are open to new interests and non-ritual uses. In view of the fact that music distribution interfaces sell music and, at the same time, make recommendations, customized advertising, and information extractivism, the

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[2] https://routenote.com/es/blog/cuantas-canciones-tiene-cada-plataforma-de-streaming-en-el-2021/

[3] *Negro prison blues and songs*, *Texas folk songs*, *Traditional music and songs of Italy*, *Raise a Ruckus*, *Alan Lomax sings great American ballads*, *The best Scottish drinking songs*, *Heather and Glen*, *Murderers´ home* y *Authentic Israeli folk songs and dances*.

[4] I am grateful to María Teresa Gil de Muro (CONICET, Argentina) for having apprised me of the presence of these songs in Spotify and other platforms.

[5] The book *Music Data Mining* (Li, Ogihara and Tzanetakis 2012) gives a clear and exhaustive idea of the objectives of this area as well as of the visualization and data processing methods in the field of music.

3

users who access them become prosumers and victims of such extractivism, as it happens when they access a pop star's hit.

Commercial platforms tend to dominate our relationship with music and, in the last years, they have played an important role in shaping the study corpuses of several disciplines. They are niches in which sound recordings are turned into data and data into commodities; researchers become users and users become prosumers. This chain of conversions brings to light the panoptic character of the streaming platform market. As a matter of fact, the study corpuses which are formed with recordings available online usually feed on different kinds of archives. To verify this, it is enough to write "La cumparsita" in a search engine to notice that the same recording of the well-known tango appears in commercial platforms, institutional pages and personal web sites and, consequently, it presents different metadata, compressions and access policies. This profusion of data and access modes is in the middle of a dispute over its control, as evidenced by the creation of the *European Data Protection Regulation,* which came into force in the Eurozone in 2018,[6] and by the recommendations of a group of experts of the European Commission for digital objects to define a *FAIR ecosystem*, i.e., in order that by means of the use of persistent identifiers they can be findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable.[7] This brief piece of writing intends to call attention to the fact that those archives found in the virtual environment and about which the disciplines which study music build their reflections, are under various attempts at commercial and legal regulation. It is essential to stop to think about the characteristics of this scenario, and about the consequences it has for the ethical, political, and scientific dimensions of music research.

## Bibliography

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[6] https://gdpr-info.eu/
[7] See: *Turning FAIR into reality* (2018).

editorial / editorial / editorial
The Platformization of the Sound Archive
Miguel A. García

4

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