Listening as Performance

The first two album apps in music history were released in 2011: The National Mall by Bluebrain and Biophilia by Björk. Since then, several articles have speculated on “the future of music” within the realm of the album format [1]. As Cage once questioned: “Composing’s one thing, performing’s another, listening’s a third. What can they have to do with each other?” [2] The format of specific album apps [3] answers this question—it is noticeable that these three roles are indistinguishable. The audience acts in a manner that exceeds the conventional way of listening, which is sometimes perceived as passive. In the album app format, the action of listening is dependent on inputs performed by the listener via mobile gadgets. In order to access the musical content, one must perform actions such as walking, tapping or tilting the device’s screen. Often the experience occurs while creating new versions of the songs, which I refer to here as creative listening. This is an intervention into the narrative and aesthetics of the album, executed by altering musical structures and their duration. Before the immensely debated changes introduced in the Bluebrain and Björk releases, Simon Frith had already discussed the shifting boundary between staged and everyday practices, analyzing the ways in which listeners are performing music for themselves: “[It] is not just that in listening to popular music we are listening to a performance, but, further, that listening itself is a performance” [4]. In detailing his argument, Frith considers factors such as musical pleasure, meaning and evaluation. As an interesting parallel, “listening as performance” appears as a more physical meaning and evaluation. As an interesting parallel, “listening as performance” appears as a more physical

From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, open compositions were mainly restricted to the classical music environment. Later the form was no longer limited to this select circle of people and influenced a wider number of musicians, particularly in jazz, experimental and electronic music [7]. Approximately 5 decades after Eco’s essay, we may have reached the point at which musical open works are accessible by the general public via the release of album apps. As opposed to their first appearance when open pieces were performed for limited audiences in specific times and spaces, currently similar concepts are accessible to a wider range of people via smartphones and tablets.

Björk’s Biophilia was the first album app project to provoke debate. The project was conceived mainly to teach children concepts present in nature in very simplified ways and to increase people’s interest in music-making [8]. In Biophilia, the author did not state an intended order in which the album should be played. The idea of sequence is nonexistent. In its three-dimensional menu, there is no numbered track list. Nor are there A and B sides (as on an LP) or time-limited tracks (as encountered in the MP3 album format). There is no apparent indication of a correct path to follow. The Gutenberg-era “one-at-a-time” [9] behavior, provoked by systems of written language, is not a premise in this case. The album is presented as a 3D universe (on a 2D screen) in which the sounds from at least three tracks start merging. One is free to decide the direction to follow and which sounding stars (in a constellation of song apps) one wishes to mix and play. With the first interactions, the idea of nonlinear storytelling is triggered. As a brief example, the song app “Crystalline” (the lead single of Biophilia) is about human relationships, crystals and musical structure. It applies the concept of “gamification” [10] to engage the listener. Its sonic outcome is dependent on the listener’s moves (collecting virtual crystals, tilting the tablet as if driving a car). Each tunnel explored reproduces a section of the music, and it is possible to unlock new fragments if one collects the right crystals (which influences the duration of the music). In its exercise of randomness and choice, one perceives the flexibility of the musical structure. In this respect it is comparable to Stockhausen’s open piece Klavierstück XI (1952). In the latter the performer must address a large sheet of music paper with a series of note groupings. The creative performance takes place while electing, among these sections,
a specific order. We can see in both cases a combinatory structure, wherein the choices of the listener and performer shape the sonic outcome.

Considering open work pieces, graphic scores may be perceived as peculiar objects. Often they are designed to incite the improvisation process in classical musicians. In Björk’s “Crystalline” a similar proposal is presented, since the graphic interface united to the gamification proposal stimulates listeners to improvise and create new structures. At the end of the game, the option of saving the outcome (a collection of crystals made during the performance) represents a metaphor for permanence—that is, a graphic score in reverse. A score is generated after (and not before) the listening to/performing of the song app. As in this case, the crystal saved is a visual representation of the sonic outcome, which varies depending on each specific performance. A visual (and not auditory) memory is recorded for future analysis and comparison. Each listening experience may turn into a less ephemeral moment.

The first location-based album app, The National Mall by Bluebrain (2011), offers the peculiarity of improvised listening via walking in outdoor public spaces. The album was set up in a predefined area of the National Mall Park, in Washington, D.C. The premise of “music for landscape” (where the artist invites the audience to listen to/experience the album via exploring a physical space) also proposes that the walking incorporate the actions of curating and composing. Ryan Holladay describes one of the features of the album: “Approach a lake and a piano piece changes into a harp. Or, as you get close to the children’s merry-go-round, the wooden horses come to life and you hear sounds of real horses getting steadily louder based on your proximity” [11].

The location-based musical album app introduces aspects analogous to the concept of open works as well as the “walking as remixing” by Behrendt [12]. The directions and time taken while walking determine the aesthetics and duration of the album. LaBelle’s observation also illustrates the concept:

Walking, as a performative act . . . sets into relief a dialogue between subjective consciousness and the dynamics of place . . . . The walking body carves out within the environment a sort of refuge for making contact or for cultivating an explicit orchestration [13].

That idea resembles Debord and the Situationists’ approach to psychogeography and the theory of the dérive or de Certeau’s studies regarding walking as a creative practice [14].

Bluebrain’s The National Mall and Listen to the Light (2011) [15], Tempest by Bob Dylan (2012) [16], and Walk with Me by Strijbos and Van Rijswijk (2011) [17] apply locative art concepts, already existent in specific sound walks, to musical album apps. However, I believe that accessibility is a relevant, novel feature introduced by this contemporary format. It does not limit the audience as much as sound walks’ initial format utilizing Walkman or CD players. This feature may produce a popularization of the practices of locative art and its appreciation in public spaces, making it easier for audiences to appreciate local art and for artists to expose their works more widely; additionally it enables filtering. One can only access the musical content when running a specific app and walking in predefined spaces. This way the music is not invading the universe of the pedestrians uninvented—unlike artists’ performances on the streets, randomly delivering a new musical selection to the sidewalks and impacting diverse audiences.

### Authorship in Open Works and Album Apps

The concept of authorship, as in a composer delivering a closed musical piece, can turn into a question mark when considering open works and album apps. When listeners’ interventions result in countless versions of a single song app, who is supposed to be considered the composer? Should one perceive album apps as composed by an immeasurable number of authors? An interesting perspective is presented in Eco’s “work in movement” analysis:

> The possibilities which the work’s openness makes available always work within a given field of relations. As in the Einsteinian universe, in the “work in movement” we may well deny that there is a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organizing rule which governs these relations. Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the “work in movement” is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author [18].

According to the premise of the unfinished work, the composer draws paths that stimulate the exercise of choice by the performer. Similar conditions are evidenced in the projects noted above by Björk, Bluebrain, Dylan, and Strijbos and Van Rijswijk, as well as REWORK by Philip Glass and Scott Snibbe [19]—to name a few. The structure of the whole is given by the artists who realize these projects, while the final musical outcomes will always be a reflection of their listeners’ interventions. Henri Pousseur, when describing his open work Scambi (1957), stated:

> It is not out of the question that we conceive these formal notations as a marketable product; if they were tape-recorded and the purchaser had a sufficiently sophisticated apparatus, then the general public would be in a position to develop a private musical construct of its own [20].

I wonder if the “sophisticated apparatus” mentioned by Pousseur could be interpreted to include the mobile gadgets with which the general public currently uses to play album apps; and, more importantly, if the “new collective sensibility in matters of musical presentation and duration” [21] is actually emerging via the album app format.

### Future Album Formats

As Eco comments, “indeterminate compositions” were once a reflection of a post-theological era, when the open-ended universe of Einstein, Heisenberg and Bohr undoubtedly influenced the artistic scene. It is clear that album apps should be interpreted as a product of our new media-oriented times, but I personally believe that contemporary artistic production may also reflect economic factors and technological availability. That often will determine when specific works of art are accessible (or not) to their audience. After the Napster era (in which access to any kind of digitally recorded music was made possible anytime and anywhere) [22], artists and music labels needed to conceive new manners of engaging their public. The times demanded new solutions for how a musical album could offer extraordinary facets to engage their public. I cannot determine whether the album app was merely a response by artists to “digital Darwinism” [23] or if it was a natural consequence of the state of the art of mobile media technology [24]. Personally, I find both viewpoints plausible. From the perspectives of media ecology [25], new media and media culture studies, I see the aspect of creative listening as a major feature presented. It invites the listener to play a new role, merging the listening with improvised creation, promoting subtle or drastic musical interventions.

In this article I raised initial questions, relating album apps to a historical past.
However, I believe there is a lack of empirical research on the side effects of this specific format. Creative listening represents a compelling field of research, which I recently examined in a case study [26] and I am interested in developing in depth in future research. I also recognize a great potential in the work in the movement aspect that is present in the projects discussed here. I believe it represents a fertile ground for future research, from analysis of the current developments to speculations on how future mobile gadgets could possibly transform the listening experience more drastically.

References and Notes
3. When using the term album app, I refer to applications developed exclusively for smartphones and tablets, designed and released as musical albums.
6. C. Cox and Warner [5].

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