



A Methodical Approach to Preserving Audio Documents

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DESCRIPTION

Computer science provides numerous opportunities to study the humanities; one major topic that has grown rapidly in recent decades is the application of computer engineering to musical cultural heritage, with a particular focus on audio document preservation. Scholars and the general public began to pay more attention to musical event recordings and their value, both on a personal and collective level and on a cultural and entertainment level. However, the diverse nature of these documents makes systematic preservation and fruition difficult. Beyond the audio signal itself, recordings contain information about their artistic and cultural existence. In this sense, access to the audio document cannot be faithful and satisfying without its associated contextual information, that is, all the content-independent information represented by the container, signs on the carrier, accompanying material, and so on.

The preservation of audio documents

This section presents the most important positions in the thirty-year-long debate over the preservation of audio documents. The ethics of preservation are discussed from the perspective of the various motivations for going digital, which result in different operational choices.

Two legitimate directions

The journal article that started it all in 1980 was signed by William Storm, Assistant Director of the Thomas A. Edison Re-recording Laboratory at Syracuse University Libraries at the time. For the first time, the article raised the issue of standardizing audio restoration procedures, and it became famous for the number of controversies it sparked. Storm identified two legitimate directions, two types of re-recording that are appropriate from an archival standpoint: sound preservation of audio history and sound preservation of an artist.

According to the UNESCO-commissioned guide, the philosophical approach is to save history rather than rewrite it. Schüller's new formulations clearly have an impact on the audio section. Schüller's works move from a different methodological point of view, "which is to analyse what the original carrier represents, technically and artistically, and to start from that analysis in defining what the various aims of re-recording may be." In terms of reconstructing the history of music perception, Schüller says, "The only case where the use of original equipment is justified is in the exotic aim of reconstructing the sound of a historical recording as it was originally heard."

Instead, he directs attention toward defining a procedure that ensures the best possible re-recording of the signal by keeping audio processing to a minimum. After leaving aside the general philosophical themes, Schüller moves on to a thorough examination of signal alterations, which he divides into two categories: Intentional and unintentional.

The latter are further divided into two groups: Those caused by a flaw in the recording technique used at the time, resulting in various distortions, and those caused by misalignment of the recording equipment, such as incorrect speed, deviation from the vertical cutting angle in cylinders, or misalignment of the magnetic tape recording. The former include recording, equalization, and noise reduction systems. Different re-recording methods emerge depending on whether or not to account for these changes: "Various degrees of historical accuracy can be referred to: Type A is the recording as it was originally heard, which corresponds to Storm's Type I described in the preceding section; Type B is the recording as it has since been produced, accurately equalized for intentional recording equalizations, compensated for potential errors brought on by out-of-phase recording equipment, and replayed on contemporary equipment to reduce replay distortions.

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