(Un)Playing Music at Sofar Sounds: Some Elements of an Ethno(methodo)musicology of Live Performances

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File Attachment: (Un)Playing Music at Sofar Sounds: Some Elements of an Ethno(methodo)musicology of Live Performances [1]

Bring back magic to live music[1]

About fifty people are gathered in an office space in eastern Paris, somewhere close to République. There is no stage, no seats, no massive PA system, or stage lighting — all elements that generally characterize music venues. Spectators (or "guests" in Sofar Sounds' vernacular language) are sitting on the floor, waiting for artists to appear. This unusual setting is what Sofar Sounds offers to artists to perform music. Created ten years ago, Sofar Sounds centers around the mission of "bringing back magic to live music." Since then, the company organizes "secret shows" in "unconventional spaces," such as this Parisian office.

I build on Erving Goffman's (1974) question ("What is going on here?") – as addressed in Christopher Small's (1998) analysis of the concert opera – to explore Sofar Sounds' "magic." Here, the term should not be understood in the same sense of magic as conceived through the practice of shamanism. Rather, magic in this case acts as a qualifier that measures the capacity of "performers to leave their audience spellbound" (de Jong and Lebrun 2019:1). Drawing from my doctoral ethnographic research of Sofar Sounds' events (Riom 2021a), this article aims to explore the ways music is played at concerts.

However, returning to the question at hand ("what is going on here?") is not a simple feat. For nearly fifty years, the sociology of music has attempted to distance itself from an approach focused on "'readings' of art works or styles in order to uncover (decode) the ways that they reflect or run parallel to 'Society' (to, that is, ideology or relations of production)" (DeNora 1995:296; Zolberg 1990; Hennion 2015; McCormick 2006). In doing so, sociologists have not only avoided questions about the "meaning" of music, but also the music itself. As Antoine Hennion emphasizes: "While the sociological agenda of the past is quasi-unanimous about revealing the social construction of the aesthetic subject and object, it provides little analysis of the results of artistic production" (1997:416). Therefore, describing what goes on during a musical performance requires taking a step aside from the way sociologists generally approach music.

This article is organized into three parts. The first reviews three approaches to analyze live music that focus, respectively, on collective action (Becker 1982), media and communication (Auslander 1999), and shared experience (Small 1998). These three approaches emphasize different elements to better understand what is at stake during a Sofar Sounds performance. However, they all have the same flaw: They locate the power of music outside of the situation in which it unfolds. In the second section, I reconsider these lessons from the perspective of Harold Garfinkel and ethnomethodology in order to build an approach that I call *ethno(methodo)musicology*. In the third section, I assess this approach by analyzing the performance of a young Parisian rapper named Transphorme. In conclusion, I attempt to formulate some suggestions for the future study of live performances.

What is going on here? Popular music studies and the problem of performance

By gradually distancing itself from questioning the meaning of music in order to focus on its production or consumption, sociology has mostly left musical analysis to aesthetic philosophy and musicology. The risk of such lack of interest on the part of music sociologists is to create divisions between, on the one hand, an aesthetic or musicological reading of music completely separated from its performance, and on the other hand, a sociological analysis of the concert unable to fully address how music is played.[2] Therefore, how can we study music from its performance and avoid such a division?[3] How can we shift from an approach that considers music as texts and investigate the actions people do to make a performance happen (Finnegan 2007; Hennion 2012)?[4] In this section I review three perspectives that can help to address this issue.

In his programmatic book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker (1982) argues that art should be approached as collective

action. This collective production of art is made possible by conventions, which allow coordination between the different actors. For instance, at Sofar Sounds, spectators remain silent and ready to listen and discover new music (Riom 2020). These conventions not only have practical dimensions, but also aesthetic ones: “Composers can, for instance, take for granted that audiences will understand and respond, as expected, to a minor key as ‘sad’ or to certain rhythm patterns as ‘Latin American’” (Becker 1982:45). The jazz musicians described by Becker and Robert Faulkner (2009) adjust their repertoires to the performance environment. For Becker, breaking from these conventions has a cost: While artists can use such strategies to create surprise, it requires going against a variety of processes, habits, and technical devices that follow an art world’s established conventions (Becker and Pessin 2006:173). Therefore, Becker teaches us that playing music is situated and distributed, and is, most importantly, based on collective agreements. However, this suggestion does not satisfactorily answer the question of “what is going on here?” It instead generates other questions: Where do these conventions emerge from? And who imposes them? For example, Marc Perrenoud (2007) argues that musicians affirm the quality of their musicianship from the legitimacy and norms of concert settings, and not from how they play. Perhaps we should follow Antoine Hennion and “give Becker a micro-aesthetic-political twist by following aesthetic constituencies as they mobilize different mediators in support of espoused versions of musical authenticity and value” (1997:416).

There may be more to consider through evaluating the media system of Sofar Sounds’ events. Within this performance space there is no stage or PA system, and the spectators are sitting just a few steps away from the performer. Could this suggest that the magic of Sofar Sounds comes from the immediacy of live performances? This question is central in Philip Auslander’s (1999) *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. As his starting point, the author takes the generally accepted idea that live performances are more real and authentic than mediatized performances, which are considered reproductions of reality. However, Auslander refuses to attribute the “magic” of live performance to a particular ontology that emanates from the co-presence of participants or the communion between them. He instead seeks to deconstruct what we consider “live.” In the third chapter of the book, “Tryin’ to Make it Real: Live Performance, Simulation, and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture,” he argues that an “authentic” performance is not the same in different subgenres of rock, but is defined by their own ideology of live music. Furthermore, this “ideology” is constructed by a “political economy of media” that gives certain forms more symbolic value than others (ibid.:187). Following Auslander, Jeder Silveira Janotti Jr. and Victor de Almeida Nobre Pires (2018) analyze the success of Sofar Sounds as a consequence of concerts’ megalomania and ubiquity of music. Music lovers would therefore be looking for more intimate and authentic performances. I do not completely refute these arguments. However, only viewing Sofar Sounds as a result of a political economy of media makes the “mediations” — a concept Auslander invites us to consider — lose all their agency.[5] Such arguments reduce the “density” of the musical experience more than they allow when unfolding “what is going on here?”[6]

Christopher Small has taken a close interest in the concert experience. In his now-classic book, *Musicking: The Meaning of Musical Experience* (1998), the British ethnomusicologist described in detail what makes an opera concert. Small uses his observations to sketch a general theory of music making, what he calls musicking:

What is going on in this concert hall is essentially the same as that which goes on during any musical performance. Members of a certain social group at a particular point in its history are using sounds that have been brought into certain kinds of relationships with one another as the focus for a ceremony in which the values — which is to say, the concepts of what constitute right relationships — of that group are explored, affirmed, and celebrated (Small 1998:183).

For Small, performing engages all actors in a collective process, regardless of their position (musician or spectator). This experience is intimately linked with “exploring,” “affirming” and “celebrating” values. Music allows for the connection of elements beyond what language can express. This is the reason why, according to him, it is so difficult to translate musical meaning into words.

While Small’s attempt is both ambitious and stimulating, it is disappointing when it comes to the meaning of music. First, he treats musical scores as the main evidence. While the strength of his book is precisely in resituating music as a performance, Small chooses to turn to texts in order to grasp its meaning. The orchestra, the audience, the concert hall and all the elements Small brings to our attention suddenly disappear. Second, what plays out is already written in the cultural frameworks of a social group. The performance — and the question of “what is going

on here?" — is, therefore, only a consequence of something wider (e.g., culture, representations, beliefs).[7] If the idea of musicking greatly contributes to the question I attempt to address here, then Small returns to a vein of commentary that the sociology of music seeks to move beyond.

Toward an ethno(methodo)musicology?

The solution may be to remain modest and resist the method of interpretation Small attempts. Instead, I suggest following actors to understand what Anne-Sophie Haeringer calls "the modalities of composition of the intelligible and the sensible" (2011:28), and therefore sticking to the problem of how musicians actually play music (Cohen 1991; Finnegan 2007; Bennett 2017). Here, Harold Garfinkel (1991) can provide precious help. He developed ethnomethodology precisely as a critique to the social sciences' indifference to what occurs *in situ*. He thus proposed a radical shift: Social order cannot be grasped as a reality external to interaction; it is, on the contrary, always the product of interaction. The aim of this analysis is to follow the "contingent accomplishment of socially organized common practices" (Garfinkel 1991:33). Firstly, the detour through ethnomethodology allows us to reframe issues raised by Becker, Auslander, and Small, respectively.[8] We can understand collective action, music media existence, and shared concert experience as products not of "external" realities — e.g. conventions, ideology, or culture — but of the musical performance itself. Therefore, playing music is more complex than a simple sequence of gestures or notes; it also involves room acoustics, sound processing, and song rehearsing (Atkinson 2006; Bennett 2017; Riom 2021a). A performance is not only a piece of music. It entails the process that makes music come into existence (Hennion 2012). Second, Garfinkel argues that "to recognize what is said means to recognize how a person is speaking" (ibid.:30) — or, in the context of Sofar Sounds, to recognize what is being played means to recognize how musicians are playing. This is a decisive lesson from ethnomethodology: Actors are competent and reflexive. If ethnomethodology aims to study ethnomethods — i.e., the operations by which individuals carry out their actions — then perhaps it is useful to develop an approach capable of identifying the operations used to make music happen, a sort of ethno(methodo)musicology. Placed between ethnography and musicology, the term "methodo" enables a radical transformation to the projects of these two disciplines. The aim then is to understand music as it is defined by actors, through their own (practical) musicology (Hennion 2002; Hennion 2019).

Let's go back to Sofar Sounds. The company was founded in London in 2009 and organizes concerts in a wide variety of spaces: living rooms, offices, shops, gardens. Its events are designed to put "music at the center." Spectators are asked to leave their phones aside, to avoid talking during the concerts, and to focus on the live performances.[9] Each event features three acts, and spectators do not know in advance the names of the artists who will perform. While the company is now present in eighty countries, it is mainly active in the United Kingdom and the United States. Before the 2020 lockdown, Sofar Sounds organized nearly five hundred events a month. In cities with few events (one to four every two months, named "hat-cities"), shows are run by volunteers and donation-based. In cities where Sofar Sounds events are more active ("full-time cities"), audiences pay between $10 and $30 depending on the city and the day of the week.

Most of my informants agree that playing at Sofar Sounds requires some adjustments. The setting forces artists to pay attention to the "indexicality" of their music, in ethnomethodological terms (Garfinkel 1991), the fact that words or gestures have only meaning regarding the situation in which they occur. This characteristic engages them in a reflexive inquiry on how they play music in this particular setting. Through combining both interviews and observations, I investigated the way musicians make music happen. Between October 2017 and March 2020, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography of Sofar Sounds by attending twenty Sofar Sounds events in Paris, London, Lausanne, and Geneva. I have also interviewed musicians, Sofar Sounds workers (volunteers and paid staff), and spectators based in Switzerland, France, Turkey, Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom equaling a total of fifty-nine interviews. In addition to this fieldwork, I carried out an extensive documentary analysis of both Sofar Sounds' documents and sites, as well as press articles. This material was processed in a logic of continuous analysis of my materials (Glaser and Strauss 2017).

My encounter with Sam was an important step in my understanding of what is going on during a Sofar Sounds. Sam is a musician — a veteran of Sofar Sounds — who at that time was in charge of relations with artists at the Sofar Global office in London. Over the years he has developed a clear idea of what it means to play at Sofar Sounds:

I think an artist has to engage really well with the audience. So he has to be able to get people to clap, sing along or tell the story of the song. He has to be charismatic and engaging. No matter what the genre [of music], if you're down and not really engaging, it's not a good Sofar performance, in my opinion. I think it's also interesting like the stripping down. You have to get to the heart of what the song is about. Personally, I didn't like when people bring too much equipment, too much electronic equipment, too much amplification. And maybe that would work in a traditional venue, but there's something about a Sofar space where you have to be a little bit stripped down so that you can see the song. And I think that's a big challenge for some artists. 'Oh my gosh, how are we supposed to take all this stuff off, and what's left?' That's how you tell the difference between a good artist and a great artist. […] If you take away everything that's left and the songs are still as good, the musicianship is still as good, they're charismatic, and they still engage with the crowd as well, then that's kind of the sign of greatness in terms of quality. […] I think the key to being a really good Sofar artist is to take your normal set and make it more simple. So if you have a lot of electronics, a lot of samples, that's cool, but make it work in a smaller, more intimate environment. You have to get back to the essence of the songs. […] I think any genre and anyone can do Sofar. It's easier for a singer-songwriter if it's already just him and a guitar or a piano, but any band can do it. They just have to be creative. They have to think about how it's going to sound when you don't have a big sound system to play it on. […] Artists have to keep it simple and interesting, the more creative the better. (Interview with Sam, Sofar Sounds employee, London, September 2018).

In a few sentences, Sam describes precisely how musicians adjust their way of playing. First, Sam explains that artists "stripped-back" their music. He insists that competent artists know how to underscore the "heart of the song." In other words, Sofar Sounds is based on a very specific idea of what a song is: a "heart" from which one could remove its "production," i.e., any use of amplification and associated sound texture processing (electronic instruments, effects, pre-recorded tracks). In the absence of a large amplification system, musicians cannot rely on the strength of such devices to arrange the different sound tracks before broadcasting it to the room.

Second, Sam explains that "good" performers engage with their audience. For example, they talk between songs, and/or tell anecdotes about themselves or their songs. Moreover, they invite the audience to sing or clap along. The stage, lights, and other elements that artists utilize to embody and express their performance are absent. They perform without relying on the common components of a stage apparatus that typically organizes the relationship between spectators and performer. As a result, they rethink their gestures, expressions, and the ways they address the audience.

Third, Sam insists that artists must make their music interesting — even playful. Here again, the absence of a stage creates a peculiar regime of visibility: On the one hand, the audience can see everything going on (e.g., the artists' gestures, their fingers on the instruments, and their expressions), and on the other, there is relatively little to see (e.g., no lighting system, video projections, or set design). Here, a musician's playing is the only thing that sparks interest. "You can see the song," as Sam says succintly. Fourth, Sam explains that a good artist can reinterpret their music by adapting songs to the context of the performance. In a way, there is a search for an ephemeral musical form that belongs only to the moment and the relationship that is established with the people present in the room.

Transphorme: Putting rap into songs

Drawing on the performance of Transphorme, a young Parisian rapper, in this section I asses my approach by following how he and his producer play and unplay — in reference to the ethnomusicological idea of doing and undoing (Müller 2011) — their music at a Sofar Sounds show. I examine how the elements emphasized by Sam emerge into certain practices. I start by describing Transphorme's performance. Then, based on interviews with different artists, I try to grasp how rapping techniques and skills are put to the test by Sofar Sounds' setting, as well as how musicians adjust their ways of playing music.

At the limits of (t)rap (Paris, December 2018)

Tonight, the concert takes place in an "event loft" in Paris, and Transphorme is the last artist of the evening. The

young rapper is accompanied by his producer, the musician who composes the instrumental pieces on which Transphorme raps. During the performance, the musician is installed on the side with his computer and a beat pad that allows him to manage the diffusion of instrumental tracks. He also plays guitar on some songs. Transphorme is sitting on a barstool facing the audience.

I have rarely seen a performance at Sofar Sounds that sparks this much enthusiasm from the audience. Between each piece, the audience strongly applauds the artist. In my notes, I write that it is a rather “calm” sort of rapping style. The songs are melodic and similar to artists such as Stromae. The music deviates from my expectations, which I assumed would be a rather aggressive and rhythmic sound. Between songs, he provides explanations of his performance. With his producer, they developed a set to perform for this event. James and Marie — two members of the organizing team — tell me after his performance that this is Transphorme’s third time playing at Sofar Paris. Moreover, the rapper admits to the audience: “It’s nice to be able to sing songs like the last one,” in reference to a rather intimate and calm track. I’m surprised that some songs have completely instrumental parts. Transphorme begins improvising by scatting. The guitarist responds by attempting to reproduce the same melody introduced by the rapper. The melodic patterns initiated by Transphorme become more and more complex until the guitarist cannot follow. The two musicians laugh while being applauded by the audience.

At the end of their performance, and with the audience’s unanimous enthusiasm, James asks the musicians if they are ready to play another song. The audience asks for more: a possibility that was not considered at all, and with good reason. It is extremely rare that an artist is allowed, let alone asked, to do an encore at a Sofar Sounds events. Transphorme explains that they do not have any quiet songs left: “I warn you it’s not going to be the same. It’s going to be violent. It’s going to be a dog thing,” referring to the rest of his repertoire. A person in the room adds: “We want some dump dog!” The rest of the people in the room applaud.

Transphorme then decides to play an unprepared song. The atmosphere changes radically. The instrumental track is no longer calm and still. On the contrary, there is a lot of bass with the rapid staccato rhythmic patterns closely associated with the “trap” subgenre. Transphorme starts to rap, but after only a few lines he stutters and stops. He curses: “Oh no! I stuttered! I need my buddy’s help,” he says turning back to his producer. “Isn’t there a second mic?" asks the musician. The sound technician hands a mic to the producer. He then backs Transphorme; in other words, he helps him finish certain sentences by rapping with him. In doing so, he supports the main rapper and covers the moments when he stumbles on the last words of a punchline. Together, they start the song again. Their gestures are also no longer the same. Transphorme gets up from his chair and jumps in all directions. His arms are waving. With their hands, both the rapper and his producer insist on certain punchlines that punctuate the track. This time they finish the song without further mishaps over the cheers of spectators.

Rearranging a vocal art

What happened on this last track? Transphorme may have suddenly faced the limit of his own flow. The quieter tracks allowed him to present his lyrics without any problem. The slower tempo allowed him time to emote the lyrics of each song. Conversely, the last song imposed a rhythm that he could hardly follow. As such, he needed the help of his “buddy” producer. By finishing the sentences of each line with Transphorme, the “buddy” producer masks possible stammers and allows Transphorme to catch his breath. Thus, moments when he is overtaken by the text are no longer heard. Without the help of another rapper, the song is simply not playable anymore. This mishap helps me to understand how rappers adjust their flow in situ. The quiet style of tracks like the ones performed in the first part of Transphorme’s set radically change the way they are rapped. A member of Désossés, a band from Geneva, explains that it’s not easy to find a way to rap in this particular format:

I think we were lucky because we all [the members of Désossés] have this sensibility to be able to come and offer something else and make it accessible. We talked about listening, but I think there’s also a lot of honesty in the music that comes from that kind of situation. [Playing at Sofar Sounds] has really allowed people to sit and listen for real. This is an audience that expects to hear an acoustic guitar. When they hear synths, a drum machine and dry vocals, the audience is like, “Okay, what’s the deal? How do I figure out what’s going on?” And if you give them this key, whether it’s in the groove or in the honesty, in the listening, or in anything, the audience understands quickly, and they feel that there is something even if they don’t understand everything. (Interview with Désossés, musician, August 2018, Geneva).

Marie, who manages several rap groups, emphasizes similar points:

You're really on the edge. When on stage, when you have smoke, the lights, you are jumping around and you often have other guys on stage with you, jumping, yelling into the microphone too, your buddy coming to back you up. At Sofar Sounds, you don't have all that. So [you] really have to be in tune, you have to be in rhythm, you have to be right. If you stutter at Sofar Sounds, it's more stressful because people are watching you. People's eyes are on you, which is still a little intimidating [laughs]. (Interview with Marie, manager, December 2018, Paris).

Marie illustrates how "on-stage" slipups that would normally be masked by lights, smoke, noise levels, or other musicians are much more audible in a stripped-down setting. The challenge, then, is to re-articulate the text and to find the "nuance," whereas on stage the main challenge is to share energy, jump, or rap "fast." The focal part of the flow moves from the punchline — the striking phrase at the end of the verse — to the entire verse.

Rappers, therefore, have to rethink their flow. And in that case, doing songs becomes more introspective, and perhaps closer to the rhythm and cadence of poetry slams. Transphorme's quieter tracks are good examples of how rappers adapt. In my fieldnotes I wrote that his way of rapping is closer to a form of text-based song. In this context, lyrics are more important, and the message appears more clearly. Additionally, this leaves artists more room to be moved to "honesty," to quote the member of Désossés. Sofar Sounds' setting — especially with the proximity to spectators and the absence of a PA system — challenges their way of rapping. Along with the flow, the whole style of the song is rearranged.

Changing the "Style" of Performance

Following the flow, the whole performance is transformed, starting with the instrumental track. Rappers generally depend on a PA system. In fact, some even change their equipment setup and bring acoustic instruments, as did Transphorme. If the amplification can seem less important than for rock bands, because rap appears mainly voice-centered, this transformation of instrumental tracks also requires adjustments. As the member of Désossés explains:

Absolutely [the instrumental track] is truly lacking bass in this kind of situation. In fact, it is missing [but] maybe not missing. That's the question. I think it's good that in these types of venue, there is little bass, that the instrumental track comes out a little more gimmicky and that there are frequency gaps. Because it forces us to listen to the instrumental track in a different way and to say "okay, here I am rapping, I feel that there is a gap here in the track. Well, I will change my voice or my timbre so that it either fills this gap, or that it accentuates it to give another style effect." […] We have people who follow us a little bit at each concert, and they told us that it was very interesting to see us in a different context. They said "wow, this is really something else. I felt other things going on. I wasn't just there to move my head. There, I really understood part of the text that I didn't understand at previous concerts." (Interview with Désossés, musician, August 2018, Geneva).

Without a PA system, the instrumental track sounds unusual. For instance, the lack of bass reinforces the focus on the voice and the text. It challenges the rapper in a number of ways: How can they perform the text so that it corresponds to the new track? How can they make the performance "appropriate" and find the intonation, rhythm, and flow that matches the situation? Thus, the way to transmit energy cannot be the same. Indeed, this meticulousness is what interests certain artists in playing at Sofar Sounds: It "tests" their ability to rearrange music and perform it live. As the member of Désossés reports, audiences who might be familiar with their music were pleasantly surprised to discover something else and pay more attention to the text and its meaning, rather than just

“move their heads” to the music.

Furthermore, being more visible and closer to the audience allows for different music playing. Through exploiting the visibility and proximity, artists are allowed more opportunities to enrich the performance by introducing something different. For example, Transphorme plays with the audience a lot by making fun of himself. During his performance he explains that he is too hot under his jacket, but his manager asks him to keep it for the video because he thinks he looks too thin without it. SubWolf — a London-based beatboxer — describes that this transparency allows him to show his technique. However, the performance does not become any less spectacular; as a matter of fact, it is the opposite. He recounts the pleasure of surprising the audience with his beatboxing skills:

Everyone has seen someone playing the guitar, everyone has seen someone singing, but not everyone has seen a beatboxer. What I like about it is that you can see everyone’s faces. Because what I do is sometimes very technical stuff and people would never see what I do before. I really like to see people’s reaction to some of the magic tricks for the first time [he makes one of those sounds to show me], to see their faces is amazing. (Interview with SubWolf, August 2018, interview by phone).

Sofar Sounds’ setting offers a particular situation for techniques or skills that are not always visible. In this setting, it is easier to isolate certain gestures and make them more identifiable and remarkable. In sum, rap is organized around flow — namely, the rhythmic articulation of the text (Krims 2000; Pecqueux 2003; Adams 2009). This technique is deeply affected by the format of Sofar Sounds. The proximity with the audience causes musicians to address them differently. Additionally, the absence of amplification changes the sound on which their flow relies. Thus, musicians cannot rap in the same way. Through these adjustments, rappers unplay their music in order to play it differently by rearranging their songs. They seek another way to present their text. At the same time, the test presented by Sofar Sounds places musicians at more risk of making mistakes — as the example of Transphorme’s last song shows. However, it also gives them opportunities to demonstrate their vocal virtuosity. Moreover, it emphasizes the voice and the text, as well as the techniques and skills that bind them together. With the support and the complicity of their audience, some rappers manage to make a singular and ephemeral moment happen.

Conclusion: Does “stripped-back” count as a genre?

In this article, I attempt to grasp what Sofar Sounds’ setting does to musical performance. I describe the ways musicians play and adapt their music to consider what ethnomethods actors employ in these situations. By understanding the music through its effects, I argue we can identify four aspects to this way of making music. The first is the connection between the artist and the audience. Contrary to classical music concerts, which set the composer and the composition at the center (Hennion 1991; Small 1998), or large rock concerts, which play on the effervescence of the crowd (Ferrand 2009), what characterizes Sofar Sounds is the absence of a stage. Thus, the performance opens the spectators to a specific form of intimacy and experience of “being together.” Second, the artists evolve in a particular regime of visibility: Everything that is played is seen. Moreover, this transparency makes musicians accountable to the audience. And within this regime of visibility, simple instrumentation takes precedence over complex orchestrations. Third, artists do not have a system of amplification at their disposal, an important and taken-for-granted component to live performance. This form of anti-production, or rather of de-amplification, pushes them to strip down their music. To do this, some rely on the idea that there is a “heart” of songs. Finally, these various processes result in the creation of a unique musical artifact. The artists replay their songs in adapted versions as Sofar Sounds challenges them to play and rearrange their music differently to their normal circumstances, either live or recorded. Thus, this new version creates an ephemeral and unique moment shared only by the people present in the room.

Not only does the Sofar Sounds setting “test” music by asking artists to adapt, but it also changes ways of thinking about music and, in some cases, reveals unsuspecting qualities of songs.[10] As Benjamin, a Geneva-based manager, rightly notes, it’s a “way of seeing” music, and, we could add, a way of constituting practically what makes it work. Not all music reveals itself in the same way in this setting. Whereas singer-songwriters may feel at home in Sofar Sounds’ intimate setting, other artists may feel cramped. Musicians attempt to adapt and reinvent their way of playing, at the risk, according to some, of denaturing their music. If there is no limit of musical genres at

Sofar Sounds, I have described that it is not possible to play in every way. In sum, “what is going on here” needs to be examined not in musicological or aesthetical terms because a live performance and its setting enact particular ways of making music come into existence. Moreover, this can only be acknowledged through close attention to what is going on during a concert, and how actors make this happen. Therefore, it opens a new way to study live music from performances and the worlds that come with them.

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Notes

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[2] Fortunately, there are now several significant works focusing on live music (see Frith 2007; Guibert and Sagot-Duvauroux 2013; Holt 2020; Auslander 2021). However, these authors rarely pay very much attention to "what is going on" during a concert.

[3] This dichotomy is striking, for example, in Klett and Gerber (2014), who argue that it is necessary to supplement an analysis of noise amateurs’ practices with a hermeneutic of collective structures of meaning.

[4] For a critical review of how musicology considers music as a text see Cook (2001).

[5] For a thorough discussion of the use of the concept in the social sciences and in art history, see Hennion (1993).

[6] Here by density, I refer to radical empiricism (see James 1996; Debaise and Stengers 2018) and the idea of avoiding not taking anything away *for a priori* reasons and rather attempting to grasp experience in all its plurality and density.

[7] Similar elements are found in Lisa McCormick (2006; Eyerman and McCormick 2015) for whom the meaning of music is articulated with a collective system of representation.

[8] Michael Lynch (2022:117) reports that Garfinkel criticizes Becker for speaking “of musicians’ work and do so by omitting entirely and exactly the practices that for those engaged in them makes of what they are doing…: making music.” Here I follow other authors who have mobilized the legacy of ethnomethodology to address musical practices (Sudnow 1993; Gerard and Sidnell 2000; Hennion 2002; Weeks 2002; Pecqueux 2007; DeNora 2017; Müller 2018; Boivin 2020). For instance, Alain Müller and Marion Schulze (2021) examine the ethno-geohistories of hardcore punk, constructed and shared by those who call themselves hardcore kids. In his ethnography of electronic musicians in China, Basile Zimmermann (2015) provides a brilliant description of how music understanding is situated in practices, gestures, and practical theories.

[9] For a more detail description of how Sofar Sounds frames spectators’ experience, see Riom (2021b).

[10] One could even speak here of a "trial of strength", in the sense that it participates in establishing what things are (Latour, 2005), not only music, but also Sofar Sounds and the artists.

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