Discophilie or Discomanie?: The Cultural Politics of Living-Room Listening
Matthew F. Jordan
French Cultural Studies 2005; 16; 151
DOI: 10.1177/0957155805053704

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://frc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/16/2/151
Discophilie or Discomanie?
The Cultural Politics of Living-Room Listening

MATTHEW F. JORDAN
Pennsylvania State University

This article examines the early debate over the impact of people listening to phonograph records on musical culture and French cultural health. The new private experience of listening to mechanised music made possible by phonograph technology, and the different ways in which this recorded music was used, radically challenged the traditional conceptions of public musical cultural praxis. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, French critics were forced to come to terms with the many changes in how music was being produced, promoted and consumed. As a result, they developed new procedures for evaluating popular music and new theories about the function, importance and paradoxical nature of modern popular culture.

Keywords: music criticism, music industry, phonograph, popular culture, recorded music

Le phonographe est désormais un accessoire de la pensée comme les livres … Grand maître des vies imaginaires, le phonographe double la personnalité d’un homme. (Pierre Mac Orlan, 1971 [1925])

Aujourd’hui que la musique est produite à discrétion par des appareils inanimés, elle excède notre patience, elle met à rude épreuve notre besoin de recueillement et de repos. La guerre des phonos est l’un des aspects de la guerre civile … Les phonophiles enragés ne font plus une distinction suffisante entre le divin Mozart et les sauvages du jazz. Les victimes, les phonophobes eux-mêmes, s’ils ne consentent pas à se couler de la cire dans les oreilles, finalement harcelés par cette musique venimeuse, demeurent sans défense contre la bassesse, la pornographie, et la sottise agressive. (Georges Duhamel in Mangeot, 1931b: 351)
Phonograph technology is perhaps the single greatest influence on popular music in the twentieth century. When discussing the impact of the phonograph on French popular culture in the 1920s, the analogy with the printing press is helpful for emphasising the revolutionary nature of mechanically recorded and reproduced music, which transformed musical culture in the twentieth century, much like the printing press revolutionised the world of ideas in the fifteenth century. Just as the printing press created new modes of organisational rationality, fertilised new cross-cultural forms of communication, and set off an explosion of new thinking and a new way of sharing information in the West, the invention and dissemination of recording technology and records forever changed the way that music was experienced as a cultural form. The force of that change can be measured by the debate surrounding the phonograph, and by the development of an ongoing and sometimes cantankerous conversation about the direction of popular music in the age of mechanised reproduction. Just as terms like bibliophile and bibliophilia emerged to characterise the new form of enjoyment surrounding the consumption and collection of books, so too words and ideas like discophile, discophilie, phonophile and phonomanie emerged as keys to the conversation surrounding la musique mécanique. Such terms were used to negotiate some very important questions for French culture critics. Was the growth of private listening engendered by la machine parlante, as an alternative mode of cultural praxis, good or bad for French culture? At what point, they asked, did a healthy discophilie become a dangerous form of discomanie and what were the symptoms of this unhealthy obsession with la musique mécanique? If, as conservative critics argued, the rise of the phonograph was contributing to the decadence of French culture, especially of la musique populaire, what, if anything, could be done to restore true French popular music and rejuvenate the ethos of French culture? By making their case about the nature of mechanised music, thinking through its social function and arguing about what listening to records was doing to French men and women, writers were able to update their sense of healthy Frenchness and come to terms with the changes in modern French culture. As they worked through the implications of the new medium, their own procedures for evaluating music, and for relating to the growing public of private listeners, shifted as well. This essay will analyse that shift in behaviour and mentality during the 1920s.

Like most debates over the direction of French culture, the discourse on the impact of the phonograph and mechanised music first emerged within an ongoing debate over the nature of popular music in modern times. Indeed, the first attempts to make sense of the impact of phonographic recording were positivist testimonies about the technical possibilities of the new invention. Fascinated by its novelty and potential, critics rarely concerned themselves with how la machine parlante might change musical culture. The phonograph, like all modern inventions, was a sign of progress; and progress, such critics offered, was always a good thing. Most early observers felt that the capacity of recording technology to capture and
reproduce sound more than compensated for any negative potential it might have had. Cultural heroes of the nineteenth century, like actress Sarah Bernhardt, raved about the new invention: 'C’est ce que j’ai entendu de plus pur, de plus complet, je l’affirme' (Wolff, 1929: xix). Indeed, with the limits of the technology – no loudspeakers, short duration and very poor sound quality, especially for reproducing strings and bass – and the hefty cost, phonographic listening was a form of enjoyment available only to a small portion of the haute bourgeoisie. Thus few critics thought to oppose the phonograph. Yet by the early 1920s, with the machines and records becoming cheaper and more available, one begins to hear concerned rumblings about the changes that the phonograph was bringing to French musical culture.

In many cases, the early critics of the phonograph saw it as a neutral technology that merely extended the cultural trends associated with popular culture. Culture critic Émile Vuillermoz, for instance, gave voice to a growing concern about the poor state of popular music in France, which he linked to a slow decay in the democratic social function of music. Music, he argued, ‘a trahi progressivement, de siècle en siècle, sa haute mission démocratique. Elle devient, de plus en plus, le langage secret et confidentiel d’une aristocratie particulièrement orgueilleuse de ses privilèges’ (Vuillermoz, 1923: 196). Yet as elite music lost touch with the people and withdrew into spaces and venues that kept le grand public out, le peuple were drawn to new forms of popular music fabricated out of ‘les débris harmoniques et mélodiques tombés de la table des délicats’ (Vuillermoz, 1923). While high-culture music became more and more esoteric, French popular music fell under the efficient regime of modern cultural production, and the new tunes produced by the new century’s international culture industry were readily consumed by the French populace. ‘Des millions de voix reprennent en chœur leurs pauvres refrains. Le plus humble village en recueille l’écho, et ce sont leurs fredons égrillards, beaucoup plus que notre vieille chanson populaire du terroir, que sifflote le laboureur’ (Vuillermoz, 1923: 197). One must emphasise that such popular music, disseminated as sheet music to be played in or out of the home, was still very much, in the language of Roland Barthes, a component part of a lively musica practica.³ The piano still served as the centrepiece of the private and public spaces where such music was performed, and the ability to read and play the popular sheet music was a valued talent. Yet many critics were concerned that the rise of the new popular music, even sung by amateur musicians, meant a decline in an older form of popular music that was often called ‘la musique autochtone’. Even before the war, many decried the growing homogeneity of popular music and the silencing of traditional folk music on a national level. One critic, Marcel Daubresse, put it succinctly in 1912:

L’art d’une époque, considéré dans son ensemble, est à l’exacte mesure de ce que Taine définissait [comme] la température morale de cette époque; il en est, par là même, la plus fidèle expression. Ceci admis on peut
affirmer que la crise de la musique populaire correspond à une crise morale, ou mieux, à une crise de la sensibilité collective française. Elle serait à étudier comme constituante d’un curieux chapitre de la psychologie des foules qui reste à écrire. C’est donc à la culture, ou d’un mot plus juste, à la cure de cette sensibilité que devraient tendre tous les efforts de ceux qui ont reçu le don d’influence. (Daubresse, 1912: 666)

Daubresse argued, like Vuillermoz would later, that the only way to ‘cure’ this unhealthy sensibility was to teach proper folk music at primary level. Yet as much as the didactic powers within French culture tried, they could not keep the commercial forces driving the new popular music at bay. Editorialist Le Semanier, from the solidly bourgeois L’Illustration, echoed the concern that contemporary popular music said something about ‘la bassesse d’âme’ of French culture. ‘Notre époque’, he argued, ‘a les chansons qu’elle mérite’ and those songs said something about the ‘caractère industriel de notre civilisation’. ‘La bonne chanson française’, he wrote, could not compete with the new music of modern popular culture. Whereas old French popular music used to be transmitted ‘précieusement et lentement de bouche en bouche’, now ‘les éditeurs de musique légère possèdent des moyens d’envoûtement et des puissances d’obsession qui les rendent maîtres de toute une population sans défense’ (Le Semanier, 1923: 140). Sounding much like Adorno’s description of the culture industry, he explained how the new popular music – still disseminated largely by sheet music, but beginning to be heard via mechanical reproduction – rather than arising unconsciously from the people as a sign of cultural continuity, was pushed on the public from above, ‘comme un produit pharmaceutique’:

Les méthodes commerciales les plus perfectionnées sont appliquées à sa diffusion. Par la publicité et par l’échantillonnage, le produit s’impose à la foule ... on vous inocule scientifiquement une mélodie comme un sérum. Vous la charriez ensuite dans vos veines, dans votre sang, dans votre appareil auditif et dans la circonvolution frontale où se trouvent logées les cellules de votre mémoire. Et c’est à la suite de ce processus qu’une chanson de 1923 devient une chanson populaire ... On ne peut rien contre la chanson. Elle passe par les fenêtres. (Le Semanier, 1923: 140)

In other words, the old popular music, thought to grow organically from the ethos of the people and to express their material and spiritual existence, had been replaced by a highly organised industry that produced songs as commodities and pushed them on the public from above. Moreover, because recorded music spilled over from private listening into public space, it was very difficult to contain the rising popularity of the new songs. Émile Vuillermoz described the method that recording engineers had developed for producing this top-down popular music:

Il faut que l’oreille des illettrés de la musique puisse enregistrer avec facilité ces petits textes dont la forme doit être nette et les accents
aisément perceptibles. Cette musique doit être lapidaire. Elle tendra vers la nouveauté, mais avec d’infinies précautions oratoires ... il faut la tromper par une déformation discrète d’un motif familier afin de lui procurer le double plaisir de faire, sans fatigue, un pas en avant ... C’est par une série de ‘démarques’ successives d’effets catalogués et de contours mélodiques déjà annexés que le musicien populaire s’empare progressivement de la mémoire des foules. (Vuillermoz, 1923: 199)

In the new mechanical music, the public came to crave that which it valued in all forms of modern democratic culture: newness. Yet that newness was often illusory, as the music drew upon previously tested musical formulas that the public had already shown a taste for. It was not easy to bang out these tin-pan tunes, and many great French composers had tried and failed. It was hard, Vuillermoz argued, to achieve that ‘petit coefficient de banalité spontanée, de platitude aimable et de vulgarité souriante et instinctive que la dextérité la plus souple ne saurait remplacer. Or, c’est par ce style familier que la chanson subjugue la foule et lui impose des directives musicales’ (Vuillermoz, 1923: 199). Successful popular songs borrowed short phrases from great musicians like Mozart and used them repeatedly within simplified harmonic structures. These popular motifs were often animated by modern dance rhythms, like the fox-trot, tango or the shimmy, to finish the hook for the masses. Thus, by 1923, though the industry was only beginning to employ the new media of mechanical recording and dissemination, the logic of popular music production destined for mass consumption was already in place. With the aid of energetic publicity, Vuillermoz argued, the modern culture producers ‘ont implanté dans les cerveaux modernes certaines notions de morphologie très précises’. As they began to utilise the phonograph and push their musical commodities, they would further inscribe and exploit those interpolated notions and forever change the sound and cultural usage of French popular music.

Though Vuillermoz did not believe that la musique mécanique dominated the direction of popular music in 1923, he soon began to change his tune. One reason for the change was that, around 1925, two significant technological developments signalled a new era for the phonograph. The first was the discovery of electrical recording using the microphone technology developed for radio, and the other was the radio pickup, which allowed recorded music to be played directly from the phonograph to radio listeners across the nation. These inventions turned what was largely a debate about private listening behaviour into a major public concern. According to writer Charles Wolff, this period also gave birth to a new mode of criticism, with Vuillermoz publishing the first review of a phonographic disc in which he evaluated the quality of the sound and judged the recorded interpretation. Yet as he continued writing on newly released records, Vuillermoz came to believe that the phonograph’s problems, soon to be disseminated to millions of new listeners by way of the radio, went beyond sound quality and song duration. Arguing that this cultural
situation was being driven by economic forces rather than artistic ones, he stressed the need to find a way to ‘créer de nouveaux équilibres entre l’art et le commerce’ (Vuillermoz, 1925: 7). In a culture industry reaping unprecedented profits, he noted with dismay ‘un phénomène de vulgarisation, qui en dehors de toute question de qualité impose sa loi brutale’. On top of what la musique mécanique was doing to the look and sound of traditional French culture, musicians were being replaced by machines. As such, the phonograph not only had the potential to damage the spirit of artistry in music by submitting it to the laws of commerce, but could also be materially detrimental to French musicians.4 Yet the concern about the declining presence of musicians as a part of the listening experience went beyond the economic. Critic Étienne Royer believed that the absence of musicians from the experience of mechanical music radically changed the mode of reception. When listening to records on a phonograph or over the radio, the unique personality of the interpreter was eliminated from the experience:

Dès que la merveilleuse invention eut permis de transmettre le son à distance, la musique fut assiégée mise à contribution par la TSF. On se contente d’abord modestement de transmettre des disques de phonographe et des rouleaux de pianola. Mais ces musiques, d’un caractère trop mécanique, ne pouvaient donner des résultats suffisamment caractérisés … il manquait un facteur essentiel: la personnalité de l’exécutant. (Royer, 1924: 157)

Yet while some saw the lack of a human presence as a fatal flaw, Royer still thought the phonograph and the TSF had the potential to heighten the musical sensibility of the French public. While many musicians and critics expressed ‘un sentiment d’hostilité’ and regarded mechanical music with ‘un assez mauvais œil’, Royer did not think that the availability of la musique mécanique would stop listeners from going to concerts. The phonograph and the radio, more than replacing the older form of public listening, would educate people in the privacy of their homes about new music and new performers. For the average consumer of mechanised music, ‘son appareil lui permettra d’entendre parfois, des œuvres et des artistes pour lesquels il ne se serait peut-être pas dérangé, et qu’il aura plaisir par la suite à re-entendre directement au concert: ainsi son goût et sa culture s’en trouveront augmentés, ce qui n’est certes pas un mal’ (Royer, 1924: 157). Phonograph discs could have, and many argued should have, an educative function and be a means to enhance musical culture.

Yet as the critics tried to help listeners negotiate the products of the many new artists and new kinds of music, they struggled to keep up with the sheer number of records being produced by music companies. The new species of music critic, the critic of recorded discs, most often adopted a particular mode of evaluation, judging how close individual records came to reproducing the sound of live music or ‘the real’. Musique magazine critic Roger Bickart noted
how jazz and dance records were going to ‘conduire au phonographe de nouveaux fidèles qui connaîtront et aimeront les disques de chant … L’application de l’électricité à l’enregistrement va permettre d’évoquer la présence réelle de l’orchestre’ (Bickart, 1927: 36). Moreover, with the recording process now transformed by the electronic microphone, and newer, better loudspeakers capable of reproducing ‘real’ musical sound, the phonograph’s social role became increasingly important. Writer Pierre Mac Orlan raved about the salutary benefits of mechanised popular music for the French public. All the new technologies, he argued,

no us permettent d’imaginer et de recréer le monde selon nos besoins et selon la puissance de notre sensibilité … J’ai chez moi une machine parlante qui ne trahit point, en qui j’ai confiance et qui parle la réalité d’un mystère que mon imagination peut développer dans le sens qui me plaît, au gré du jour ou de la nuit, au gré de l’heure … Le chant, c’est-à-dire la chanson populaire, possède une puissance attractive singulièrement contagieuse. (Wolff, 1929: 362)

Phonographic records, he argued, ‘se sont mêlés étroitement à notre existence sentimentale et publique’. In order to stay healthy, he went on, modern French men and women needed the new machines. ‘Placer chez soi un phonographe, c’est posséder une force permanente capable de recharger les accumulateurs d’énergie humaine quand ceux-ci viennent à faiblir’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 78). The rhythms of the phonograph that spilled out of open apartment windows onto streets below had the same healthy effect, providing ‘le rythme qui est celui des machines de l’atmosphère’ and created ‘par la force des choses’ [Mac Orlan, 1971 [1925]: 90]. Vuillermoz agreed about the power of mechanised music to move modern man, but thought the popularity of the new music – now increasingly measured by sales – revealed a great deal about the ethos of French society. ‘Le machinisme nous écrase; notre imagination et notre cœur subissent les rudes disciplines de notre ère de métallurgie triomphante’ (Vuillermoz, 1927: 14). It was not surprising to him that a culture obsessed with mechanisation would consume mechanised music, but he was surprised that this consumption would be so exclusive, given the homogeneity and monotony of phonographic production and radio programming. ‘Les programmes de nos postes français sont d’une indigence et d’une banalité réellement excessives … Aucune variété dans les choix des œuvres, aucune ingéniosité, aucun piquant dans la disposition des programmes’ (Vuillermoz, 1927: 19).

Yet with la musique mécanique playing an increasingly important role in musical culture, the enemies of the phonograph and recorded music began to shout over what they took to be the noise of the phonograph, in order to make themselves heard and warn people about the threat to ‘true’ French culture. Mac Orlan described this psychological reaction formation: ‘l’élite française se désintéressait du phonographe … La possession d’un phonographe
conférait une sorte de brevet de mauvais goût. Aujourd’hui, des hommes de qualité ont entrepris la critique des disques comme on entreprend la critique des livres’ (Wolff, 1929: 361). Indeed, by 1927, mechanised music was everywhere in France and debate about its cultural impact had become fierce. Critics were divided about the changes that the rapidly improving recording technology would bring to musical culture. Since recorded music, due to its tonal quality and limited duration, was often dismissed outright in established music journals, Vuillermoz started a new journal, *L’Édition musicale vivante*, where critics could discuss the merits of all kinds of music, especially recorded music. Yet members of the musical old guard, like the iconic right-wing composer and head of the *Scholum Cantorum* Vincent D’Indy, lashed out categorically at all mechanised music:

> La mécanique ne peut avoir avec la musique aucun rapport, puisque la musique tire sa vie de l’expression et que la mécanique est essentiellement inexpressive. Elle peut nuire considérablement aux musiciens exécutants, au point de vue matériel, le jour où une majorité de snobs idiots aura établi la prépondérance de la machine sur le sentiment humain. L’art ne peut consister qu’en une communication d’homme à homme, je dirai mieux: d’âme à âme, communication que la machine est et sera toujours incapable de produire. (*L’Édition musicale vivante*, 1927: 18)

Though D’Indy had made several records himself, dating back as far as 1904, he and other defenders of high culture would continue to crusade against recorded music and the ‘majorité de snobs idiots’ who accepted it as part of French culture.

As a large number of the records in France came from American companies, some critics mixed their distaste for mechanised music with their anxiety about the Americanisation of French culture. Leandre Vaillat described the onslaught of American popular music: ‘tous ces airs de one step, de fox, de charleston divulgués, portés aux quatre coins du monde par les disques de phonographe, célèbres comme le nom d’un boxeur ou d’un assassin’ (Vaillat, 1926: 177). It is no surprise that many critics attributed the mentality associated with record production to the modern American logic of cultural production. Even lovers of recorded music, like Mac Orlan, noted that the vogue for recorded music dated back to the war, ‘quand les soldats des États-Unis d’Amérique apportèrent dans leurs trains de combat les airs et les rythmes populaires nécessaires aux lendemains de calamités’ (Mac Orlan, 1971 [1925]: 88). Many French observers cringed at the sales figures that dramatised how American popular music, especially jazz, had been adopted by the French. Pierre Scize argued that the global popularity of jazz was largely due to the fact that it emerged at the same time as the instrument of its diffusion: the phonograph:

> Il naissait à l’instant où, après des années de recherches âpres et arides, les techniciens de la machine parlante mettaient au point leur incroyable découverte ... Voici qu’un reflet sincère de la puissance de leur art s’en
allait courir le monde sous les espèces de petits soleils noirs: les disques phonographiques. (Scize in L’Édition musicale vivante, 1927: 19)

Indeed, popular American records of all kinds seemed to flood the French market and appeared to dampen the public’s desire for more traditional French popular music. As Vuillermoz stated it: ‘la production des disques de jazz est devenue si abondante qu’il est presque impossible d’en tenir à jour un commentaire précis. C’est une avalanche sous laquelle on succombe … Comme je l’ai déjà dit le “goût américain” tend à unifier toutes ces sonorités’ (Vuillermoz, 1928: 19).

According to André Cœuroy, whose 1929 monograph Le Phonographe sought to put the machine into historical and cultural context, the sheer amount of recorded music left both the critic and the amateur in confusion:

L’anarchie, semble-t-il, est au camp du phonographe. Comment la troupe des amateurs ne connaîtrait-elle pas le désarroi devant le désastreux individualisme des catalogues? … Comment l’amateur moyen, ‘l’homme de la rue’ qui n’a pas le temps de passer tous ses loisirs au concert, pourrait-il établir la dissemblance entre toutes ces interprétations? Lui proposer simultanément le même disque sous des formes diverses, c’est à coup sûr l’embarrasser et le paralyser dans son choix. (Cœuroy, 1929: 48)

For the most virulent of the anti-Americanists, Georges Duhamel, the wave of records from America was another symptom of the decay of ‘true’ French culture. As more people listened to la musique mécanique, noise became a central concern for phonophobes like Duhamel, who called for the creation of a ‘ministère du bruit’ and of a ‘parc national du silence’ where one could escape the increasing urban noise brought about as private listening intruded into the public domain. Enemies of phonographic listening followed his lead. For example, André Mangeot began to take Duhamel’s anti-modern ranting seriously: ‘Quand, dans les Scènes de la vie future, Duhamel dénonçait les dangers de l’américanisme, on a trouvé qu’il exagérait. On reconnaît, aujourd’hui, qu’il était au-dessous de la vérité’ (in Mangeot, 1931b: 351). Critic Albert Laurent agreed that the question of public noise in relation to phonograph listening was a problem that had to be dealt with by the state:

La frénésie de la vitesse est une des tares de notre époque; la frénésie du bruit en est une autre … Le bruit a tout envahi; tout transformé, tout avili. Il harcèle inéxorablement notre civilisation violemment, il en est l’âme mobile, insatisfaite, angoissée, parfois malfaisante et cruelle … Dans le cacophonique brouhaha qui accompagne sur la scène contemporaine, la marche inquiète des hommes vers leur destinée, la musique ne se distingue plus du tumulte des foules: elle en a le caractère indiscrét et hallucinatoire. (Laurent, 1932: 38)

For him, the phonograph was just another cause of noise in a modern world that had lost its way.

Yet as the amount and availability of la musique mécanique grew in France,
new forms of consumption grew along with it. As Bernard Zimmer put it, ‘Le gramophone est devenu un instrument de première nécessité. Il y a des moments dans la journée qui ne peuvent être occupés que par lui’ (Zimmer, 1931: 241). As more people discovered the joy of listening to records, Zimmer believed that the pace of the consumption of mechanical music was becoming ‘effrayante’. Yet not all of that consumption was private. Cœuroy noted the development of ‘concerts phonographiques’, listening clubs and public discothèques for people to use. Though Erik Satie, for one, had already coined the term ‘musique d’ameublement’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 53) to describe the way in which such music was experienced privately, these semi-public spaces – as Habermas might say – and multiple usages made Satie’s characterisation obsolete. More and more companies, such as Gramophone, Pathé and Columbia, organised ‘les galas de musique mécanique’ that resembled traditional concert settings. At such events, usually designed to sell record players and radios, Bach and Irving Berlin were played in the same context, and the boundaries between high, middle and low culture in phonographic listening continued to be blurred. The ‘intimité du disque’, he argued, caused ‘l’homme de la rue’ to ‘se moquer parfaitement, et à bon droit, des doctrines et des controverses philosophantes sur l’idéal des arts mécaniques’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 55).

Indeed, more than advocating private and semi-public cosmopolitan listening, these types of events and the new critical writing provided fuel for a new and very powerful pleasure: the purchase of the new disc. This search for the right disc in one’s favourite store was the form of enjoyment that the discophile lived for. In the words of André Beucler,

Il existe aujourd’hui un plaisir qui bouleverse mieux les sens; c’est pour l’amateur, celui de choisir de nouveaux disques … On ne sait pas encore ce que cette découverte a fait pour la culture sociale de l’homme, et l’homme lui-même n’a pas encore eu le temps de faire le compte de ces connaissances invisibles qui s’ajoutent à sa sensibilité. (Beucler, 1929: 5)

Though they may have never seen the artists, listeners searched for familiar voices in record stores to bring home with them for their own consumption and to share with others. As Mac Orlan theorised, this was not merely commodity fetishism; rather listeners used their records to say something about themselves: ‘Le phonographe s’associe étroitement à la personnalité de qui le possède. “Montre-moi tes disques, je te dirai qui tu es …”’ (Mac Orlan, 1971 [1925]: 88).

Comœdia editorialist Armory, for his part, thought that someone’s taste in recorded music indicated what type of person he was, but stressed that the argument should not be taken too far. He was critical, for instance, of a study which concluded that if a potential mate was given a chance to choose what music to play when she visited your home, you could determine what she was really like:

Pour connaître les goûts et les tendances de la candidate au conjugo.
Vous laissez la demoiselle seule dans une pièce avec, pour distraire, un phonographe et quelques douzaines de disques judicieusement variés ...

Si la jeune fille choisit la musique de jazz, les harmonies éruptives, les airs de danse syncopés, c’est qu’elle aimera avant tout les plaisirs faciles, violents, peu en rapport avec la vie du foyer. (Armory, 1927: 3)

Armory, a cultural cosmopolitan who liked all kinds of popular music, did not subscribe to the facile determinism of such an experiment. Long before de Certeau theorised about the polymorphous private usage of all kinds of cultural texts in daily life, Armory argued that the records someone listened to did not necessarily tell us about the character of the listener or about how they used mechanised music in their homes: ‘On peut adorer la nostalgie d’un tango, s’amuser du rythme syncopé d’un fox-trot jazzé et être la plus gentille et la plus dévouée des épouses’ (Armory, 1927: 3). He, like many others, continued to promote the model of the healthy French listener as a person who listened to all kinds of recorded music. Such open-minded cosmopolitanism, in his mind, threatened neither private life nor public culture. As many observers noted, some listeners used recorded music to think better, some listened to it while reading a book, some used it as background noise while washing the dishes, and others danced in their bedrooms. In other words, there was no monolithic mode of listening that explained all the private behaviour. For Armory, the key was equilibrium: if there was balance, and the use of records was not excessive, then la musique mécanique could serve an important function in everyday life.

Yet while critics like Armory argued for a cosmopolitan musical culture that included la musique mécanique, culture critic Henri Collet believed that the overwhelming amount of foreign popular music in France, and the unhealthy desire to keep purchasing records to keep up with the new, was pushing French culture in dangerous directions. Modern patterns of consumption, fashions and the identity formations they constructed stacked the deck against French music:

A la vérité, il faut être de son temps. Et l’oreille populaire, accoutumée dès maintenant aux charmantes harmonies des flon-flons parisiens ou du jazz anglo-saxon, s’étonne de la pauvreté harmonique des musiques d’autrefois ... il n’est de possible renouveau de la musique française que par le populaire. (Collet, 1928: 381)

In other words, to preserve authentically French popular music, it was necessary to record and popularise it to make it more accessible to the public. If, as Walter Benjamin might say, the public’s mode of apperception had changed in dialectical relation to the new technology, it was necessary to meet listeners half-way.

Other critics, such as musician Albert Roussel, believed that the easy accessibility of la musique populaire was precisely the problem. The collective fascination with the consumption of popular foreign music and
denatured *musique légère* had caused a disequilibrium in French culture: ‘La faveur du public se porte ailleurs. L’instabilité, la nervosité des réactions du public depuis la guerre, l’invasion du jazz, de la musique mécanique contribuent sans doute à cette désaffection qui n’est, il faut l’espérer, que passagère’ (Roussel in *Le Courrier musical*, 1929: 167). Yet while urban musicians saw phonograph technology as a threat to their livelihood, it could also be said that the phonograph gave people outside of Paris who did not have access to public concerts a chance to hear the best musicians. Louis Laloy represents the kind of critic who thought that recorded music had the potential to free the provinces from an otherwise mediocre musical culture: ‘Nos provinces de France, victimes pour la musique aussi d’une centralisation excessive ne seront plus empoisonnées de mauvais goût ni de fausses notes’ (Laloy, 1929: 93). Many jazz critics agreed, arguing that records were the only way to expose French listeners to great music and the work of great artists. Hugues Panassié, who established the mould for the jazz critic and the new mode of jazz criticism, argued in his seminal 1930 essay ‘Le Jazz hot’, that:

*c’est donc à peu près uniquement par les disques que nous parviennent les magnifiques solos des grands musiciens *hot* nègres et américains. En cela les disques sont précieux, et aussi parce qu’ils sont le seul moyen de pouvoir conserver fidèlement ces improvisations*. … Bien que tous ces disques n’aient pas été édités en France, nous en possédons un nombre assez considérable et qui nous permet d’étudier en détail le style de chaque musicien de valeur. (Panassié, 1930: 488)

Panassié’s comments are instructive on a number of levels, and are symptoms of a shift in the French cultural mentality with regard to the apperception and consumption of music. By the 1930s, most of the music that people listened to was *la musique mécanique*. They listened to records on the newer record players with better loudspeakers, or heard them on the radio during broadcasts dedicated to different genres of popular music. This new listening public, a new anonymous public (much like the reading public which grew up around the printing press in the sixteenth century), which Cœuroy characterised as a ‘foule innombrable et inconnue’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 63), had new behaviours that needed to be directed. The *discophile* had to be educated, not as one whose general knowledge of the beautiful enabled him or her to evaluate any particular work, but as a better consumer. Panassié, a millionaire whose record collection was famously comprehensive, served as the voice of arbitration for jazz in France, not only with his criticism, but as president of *Le Hot-Club*, one of the new semi-public listing associations where he strengthened his authority by indexing his collection.

With all the new institutions, both critical and associational, growing around recorded music, patterns of consumption continued to shift. Odette Marjorie, in *L’Intransigeant*, noted how the individual consumer, taking part
in the ritualised buying of discs, chose recordings for a range of reasons. At
the extreme end of the spectrum was the discomane or phonomane. She
described one character who had spent ten years building his collection and,
unable to exercise his faculty of judgement, used a roulette wheel to make
his choices. ‘Encore un phonomane!’ (Marjorie in Cœuroy, 1929: 64). In the
middle, she reported, there were the kind of people who had a phonograph
‘parce que ça fait du bruit, que ça fait mieux danser qu’un piano’. At the
other end was the ‘phonophile’, a more conscious, educated and organised
type who had cultivated tastes. Such people took part in all aspects of public
culture; recorded music was merely a supplement to their cultural
experience. They were the polar opposites of the phonomanes, ‘groupe de
dégénérés’, who had become so taken by the technology that they had lost
their equilibrium: ‘La maladie revêt un caractère spécial pour chacun de
celui qui en sont atteints’ (Marjorie in Cœuroy, 1929: 3). Some people
suffering from discomanie could not function in their daily lives without the
aid of recorded music. It was as if they needed a sound track to live their
lives. Such prolific consumers of recorded music were not the average;
indeed, such fetishistic behaviour was impossible for most French people.
The high cost of phonograph machines and records, both subject to a 25 per
cent tax, made this kind of behaviour impossible for most. Yet critics agreed
that anyone looking for a new record should be guided as to what to buy,
and the rules for evaluating recorded music were different from those used
to make sense of concert music. This difference had everything to do with
the changing mode of musical production, and the corresponding shift in
mentality, in the age of mechanical reproduction.

First of all, the record critic did not concern him/herself with the musical
work of the composer, but the particular interpretation. Moreover, what
sounded good in a concert did not necessarily sound good on record given
the limitations of time and timbre. Cœuroy noted how the phonograph had
become ‘le laboratoire où les chercheurs sauront utiliser la personnalité de
l’appareil en créant des ensembles neufs où des timbres spécialement choisis
produiront des sonorités nouvelles’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 94). In other words,
music was now being dissected and analysed in relation to what sounded –
and sold – best on record, where the timbres and rhythms could be tested,
isolated and reproduced. Sounds that had, as critics put it, a certain
‘phonogénie’ were chosen and came to dominate la musique mécanique. In
most cases, this meant horns were used instead of strings, and quick
rhythmic songs were chosen over more complex compositions. Critics agreed
that the best recordings were those where the music was ‘spécialement écrit
pour lui [the phonograph]’, based on what sounded good on disc (Cœuroy,
1929: 95). For many critics, this rational and reductive approach to
producing la musique mécanique came from America. ‘Le microbe nous est
venu d’Amérique’, wrote Vuillermoz. ‘Devenu plus robuste, il a envahi
d’autres zones de l’activité humaine. Maintenant on le rencontre dans tout
l’organisme social’ (Vuillermoz, 1930: 9). Most critics agreed that the problem with American records was homogenisation and standardisation. ‘Toujours les mêmes effets rythmiques, toujours les mêmes jeux de timbres’, lamented critic Boris de Schloezer (1930: 581). Thus, as this modern method of testing and standardising musical production crept into the French culture industry, and its commodities found favour in popular culture, it was read as a symptom of Americanisation. Whether such standardisation and specialisation was American or just the product of hyper-commercialisation, breaking music down into its component parts did indeed change the way that music was produced. According to Vuillermoz, ‘la production du jazz et des disques de danse sombre de plus en plus dans la standardisation … Les refrains qu’ils adoptent sont d’une banalité soutenue et méthodique. C’est ce qu’ils appellent de la musique “commerciale”’ (Vuillermoz, 1931: 20). According to critic Marcel Boll, the phonograph ‘incitera les compositeurs à user d’une syntaxe et d’un style particuliers, à écrire une musique destinée exclusivement à être “disquée”’ (Boll, 1931: 10). More often than not, composers were now less important than the engineers and the publicists who produced the music and promoted the stars. In Vuillermoz’s words, ‘malheureusement, les industriels qui ont créé cet art nouveau n’ont pas toujours une culture musicale suffisante. Aveuglés par le culte de la vedette, ils se laissent hypnotiser et méconnaissent la valeur de certains interprètes’ (Wolff, 1929: 376). By analysing what sold, producers determined what le grand public was responding to. More than the beauty of the composition, they found that a record needed ‘des super-positions, des ralentissements, des accélérations, des découpages et des renforcements’ (Boll, 1931: 10) to be successful. The recording engineer, even when composers wrote ‘directement pour le phonographe’ (Cœuroy, 1929: 123), was now the most important figure in the world of popular music. For René Bizet, this meant that French record companies were Taylorising and tailoring their production to meet the demands of le grand public that now had a taste for Americanised music:

Il faut que nos éditeurs pensent à l’avenir qui, avec le développement de la musique mécanique prendra pour eux un nouvel aspect. S’ils négligent de faire les efforts nécessaires, demain l’édition américaine contre laquelle ils luttent déjà si difficilement, sera maîtresse de tous les débouchés, dans le monde entier. Et l’art chez nous en mourra. (Wolff, 1929: 349)

With all this popular music available for the private listener to use, many critics continued to note the problematic rise in cases of phonomanie or discomanie. In the words of Marcel Boll, ‘phonomanie’ designated the collector who ‘prescrit d’empiler dans une “discothèque” une multitude de disques dont le choix est le fruit de caprices généralement dénués de culture artistique’ (Boll, 1931: 10). For him, such patterns of consumption were not
caused by phonograph technology, but rather were merely dialectical modifications of the bourgeois way of life: ‘Le phonographe s’est insinué dans la demeure des bourgeois, sans modifier le moins du monde leur mentalité’ (Boll, 1931: 10). Arthur Hoérée also saw the ‘instrument populaire’ playing a more central role in bourgeois life, where often it transformed ‘le home en dancing’. Yet with the right guides and armed with the right lists of good records, the discophile could recreate, ‘par un choix critique et historique, l’un des moments les plus originaux de l’évolution sonore’ (Hoérée, 1931: 7); with the right critical apparatus, the discophile could be a healthy consumer of recorded music.

Many writers, like André Cœuroy, recognised that the role of the music critic in the age of mechanical reproduction was to guide the new public of listeners in the consumption of records:

On objectera que le rôle du critique est précisément d’avertir le public. Encore qu’il soit malaisé d’imposer ses goûts, et non sans outracuidance dogmatique, de décréter comme ‘les meilleurs’ une douzaine de disques par semaine, il est pratiquement impossible à un seul critique de jongler, sans en lâcher une, avec les piles de disques journellement édités. (Cœuroy, 1929: 68)

Faced with this task, Vuillermoz lamented that the critic in France was becoming more like the music critic in America, a mere publicist: ‘La vieille Europe commence à souffrir de la même déformation professionnelle … Il est symptomatique. Manquant de sincérité avec eux-mêmes, beaucoup de nos contemporains sont incapables de savoir ce qui est bon et mauvais. Ce qu’il faut, c’est la consécration rassurante du “meilleur”’ (Vuillermoz, 1930: 10). Critics now did more than, as Bourdieu might say, instruct people in the art of musical distinction and educate their faculty of aesthetic judgement; French record critics were responding to the demands of their readers. If, as Vuillermoz put it, one acknowledged ‘l’ambition que possède chaque discophile d’entrer en possession du “meilleur” disque’ (Vuillermoz, 1930: 10), then the critic’s new role was merely to direct people to the best discs and to guide people’s habits of consumption by telling them what records to buy or which radio shows and disc jockeys to tune in for. In this new world of criticism, French listeners were being taught an indexical mode of aesthetic judgement grounded in knowing what reputable critics considered the best. The chief job of French music critics was now to produce ‘best record’ lists by category and award prizes for the best artists. The individual listener’s patterns of consumption were kept healthy because reading the criticism inoculated him or her against the worst examples of commercialised popular music. Without the critic there to point out the best records in the midst of a sea of mediocrity, discophilia could soon become discomania. Of course, critics like Vuillermoz lamented this state of affairs for the burden it placed on them. ‘La partie la plus douloureuse de la tâche
d’un critique de disques est l’audition résignée d’innombrables réalisations
qui se suivent et se ressemblent toutes’ (Vuillermoz, 1931: 20). Yet as critics
tried to keep up with the records, one finds fewer examples of the
metacritique that came to terms with the cultural ramifications of the now
decade-old medium and more purely descriptive criticism. For the new
indexical critic, choosing the best record was the act of judgement; the rest
of the critical enterprise was merely describing the three minutes of music
on that record.

In sum, in less than a decade, the new technology for recording, reproducing
and consuming popular music had radically transformed the way in which
popular music was conceived and received in France. Critics, once champions
of the beautiful and the good, had become participants in a discursive
enterprise designed to stimulate desire and to guide consumers toward the
products of the culture industry. Music, which could be broken down, studied
and tested by way of recorded music, was now written and produced expressly
for the new medium, and the logic of that production soon came to dominate
other forms of popular culture. It is telling that an open-minded cosmopolitan
critic like Émile Vuillermoz, whose high degree of fidelity to the new medium
prompted him to start a journal to promote la musique mécanique, when
confronted with a 1934 screed by André Mufflet that blamed phonographic
music for following the law of least effort and the ‘besoin du bruit’ (L’Édition
musicale vivante, 1934: 12), no longer defended the phonograph against the
phonophobe. With record companies now narrowing the scope of their
recording and promoting their stars for consumption on the radio, it was hard
for public critics and private listeners not to notice how living-room listening
had forever changed the sound of popular music.

Notes
1. On this notion, see Eisenstein (1979 and 1983).
2. For examples of this type of writing, see Gautier (1905).
3. Here I am alluding to the categories established by Roland Barthes in ‘Musica Practica’.
   ‘There are two musics: one you listen to, one you play … Initially linked to the leisure
class, such music (musica practica) has dwindled into a mundane rite with the advent of
bourgeois democracy (the piano, the jeune fille, the salon, the nocturne); subsequently it
has vanished altogether … Concurrently, a passive, receptive music – one of resonance
rather than of presentation – has become music proper (of the concert, the festival, the
record, the radio): playing no longer exists’ (Barthes, 1985: 262).
4. André Mangeot (1931a) voiced the anxiety about the state of unemployment amongst
musicians as being dictated by ‘des considérations économiques’ over artistic reasons. ‘La
machine se substitue’, he wrote, ‘à l’homme et le réduit au chômage. La Crise mondiale de
surproduction dont nous souffrons, est principalement due à l’intensification du
machinisme.’ Due to the lower prices of machines and their increased usage in all kinds of
locations that used to employ musicians, ‘la musique humaine a disparu en grande partie
des cinémas, dansings, brasseries, salles de spectacles; elle est menacée au théâtre et il
n’est pas impossible que les troupes et les orchestres fort onéreux des scènes lyriques, ou
trop faiblement rémunérés des concerts symphoniques, soient un jour remplacés par des bandes sonores perfectionnées pour la fabrication desquelles il suffira d’une ou deux équipes de musiciens spécialisés.’ As a remedy, he called for the establishment of taxes: ‘d’urgence une mesure de protection en faveur d’une catégorie d’artisans dont la situation est d’autant plus tragique qu’elle forge elle-même, de ses propres mains, le film et le disque qui l’étranglent.’

5. Such concerns were perhaps not as paranoiac as they might appear. A 1935 survey published in La Revue musicale, reported that, of the 1.5 million Frenchmen who now listened to the radio, most wanted more popular music and less high-cultural French music. ‘85% de ces Français-là se déclarèrent pour la diminution de la musique “classique” au profit de la Rumba de Dudule, de la Java de Bébert (avec accordéon) et autres refrains du bon vieux temps qui se poussent au dessert des repas de noce’. As an antidote, José Bruyr suggested that it would be best ‘à confier dans les grands postes d’état le contrôle direct de toutes les émissions musicales à un vrai musicien et à un véritable musicographe’. See Bruyr (1935: 201).

6. This way of thinking about the importance of musical recording for the presence of jazz in France became a trope in French jazz criticism. Ethnographic music critic Georges Hilaire, for instance, argued that without the disc, jazz would never have become so influential: ‘le jazz mourrait’ (Hilaire, 1937). ‘Le disque’, he argued in 1933, was the ‘élément sine qua non d’information hot’ (Hilaire, 1933: 5). As such, what the French listening public needed was more true examples of recorded hot jazz.

7. In the words of Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, ‘maintenant, l’habitude est prise d’ouvrir le phonographe autant que le piano … Il faut bien le reconnaître: l’usage et l’abus du phonographe font de nous, sans que nous nous en rendions toujours compte, les victimes d’une perversion du goût’ (Vaudoyer, 1931: 10).

References

Amoretti, J. (1931) ‘“La Musique trop bruyante provoque une fragile névrose” nous dit le Dr. Toulouse’, L’Œuvre, 20 July, p. 1.
Armory (1927) ‘Musique pour fiancées’, Comœdia, 18 October, p. 3.


Matthew Jordan teaches Media Studies and Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. *Address for correspondence*: College of Communications, Carnegie Building, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA [email: mfj3@psu.edu]