Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording. By Tim Anderson. New York and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 296 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0816645183. $23.00 paper.

Reviewed by Tim Brooks

The profound impact of changing technology and marketing practices on the perception of music, and on music itself, during the post–World War II era is explored in this rather dense book. The premise is pretty simple, even though the prose is not: that the spread of "canned" music to public spaces, the introduction of high fidelity and stereo as listening experiences distinct from the music they presented, and the marketing of the same musical material in many different forms (versioning) combined—or should we say conspired?—to condition a generation to music that was something other than a communication from composers and performers to listener.

It does not become apparent until well into the book that the title is in fact a play on words. This book is not about Mantovani LPs, but rather about how "listening" was made "easy," in all fields of music. The period covered is said to be 1948–1964 (xxix), although the author begins with an analysis of the 1942 musicians' strike against the record companies. That and the subsequent 1948 strike were not, he maintains, simply about an egomaniacal union leader (James C. Petrillo) or about backward-looking musicians fighting technological displacement. Instead they were, he says rather grandly, "a struggle over the terms, forms, and goals of popular music production in the United States," representing resistance to "a particular techno-cultural assemblage" (7). Perhaps so, although a hotel piano player displaced by a recorded sound system might not have seen it that way.

Later chapters deal with "versioning," the marketing practice in which record companies took a popular musical property, and re-sold it in numerous packages. The example used is that of *My Fair Lady,* a Broadway musical sold in enough versions by Columbia Records to make one's head spin. There were instrumental, jazz and vocal versions, and even the original cast recording was modified by the record company when they omitted the dialogue and thus the context of the songs. This treatment does not differ from the way musical shows have always been treated, however. For example, the musical *Florodora* (1900) had 72 different recordings of music from the show made during 1901-1902 alone, from banjo solos to brass bands to soprano and tenor duets (imitating a double-sextette in the show). [1] Operatic arias were also routinely extracted from their natural settings and recorded in a multitude of versions, vocal and otherwise. Nearly a hundred years ago Victor recorded a burlesque of the sextet from *Lucia* sung by a cast of popular comic performers ("That note alone is worth a dollar!").[2] Isn't that "versioning"? What the author seems to believe was new was in fact age-old industry practice.

In Chapters Five and Six the author explores the introduction of high fidelity and stereo, in which technology sometimes seemed to overwhelm the music completely. Interesting early advertisements are reproduced, including one depicting a technician assembling a Fisher amplifier under the heading "This man is making music!" In a sense, the author argues, he was. Stereo recordings were marketed as "realer than real," and sound effects were superimposed on music to emphasize the capabilities of the new technology. There is a good deal of discussion of

the wave of exotica LPs in the 1950s, including those by such artists as Les Baxter, Martin Denny, Arthur Lyman and Alfred Apaka, as well as the stereo-friendly output of the Audio Fidelity label. Denny's big hit "Quiet Village" was filled with the rhythmic sounds of insects scratching and birds cawing. Denny later told an interviewer that he believed that much of his success was due to the fact that stereo had just become widespread and "people were interested in sound *per se*" (161). Meanwhile orchestra leader Juan Garcia Esquivel explicitly used stereo separation as a compositional device. Other examples include the use of excessive reverberation in pop records, such as Elvis Presley emerging from an echo chamber in "Heartbreak Hotel." This, the author maintains, turned records into "skillful fabrications rather than the unmediated representation of 'real' events" (152). But again, this is nothing new. In the very earliest years of the recording industry, when mechanically reproduced sound itself was a novelty, there were multitudes of records called "descriptives" (troops marching off to war, the sinking of the battleship *Maine,* etc.), recreations of minstrel shows, even a recreation of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake ("run for your lives!"), all accompanied by sound effects and other *faux* audio stimuli. Performers sometimes moved up to or away from the recording horn while singing to simulate motion. "Skillful fabrications" have been a stock in trade of recording since its inception.

The introduction of electrical recording in 1925 dramatically altered the presentation of music, perhaps more than stereo. Orchestra instrumentation changed (banjos out, string bass in), full symphony orchestras began to be heard more closely than they could in the concert hall, crooners became popular (you couldn't have heard them through a recording horn—one can argue whether this was progress). *Making Easy Listening* would benefit from a better sense of historical context, as well as from more specific musical examples.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Making Easy Listening* is its analysis of music in the post–World War II years, a period not much studied by scholars. The emphasis is mostly on adult popular music, "easy listening" as it were, as well as on the changing technology that it reflected. Despite the author's complex language and attempts to represent this as a tectonic shift in musical culture the conclusions seem somewhat obvious however, and not necessarily new to the period in question.

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[1] Tim Brooks, "Early Recordings of Songs from *Florodora,*" *ARSC Journal* 31/1 (Spring 2000): 51-69.

[2] Billy Murray with Vaudeville Quartette, "Lucia Sextette Burlesque," Victor 17119 (1912). The routine was from the show *Hanky Panky.*