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**Mediated Immediacy: The Relationship between Auditory and Visual  
Dimensions of Live Performance in Contemporary Technology-Based Popular  
Music**

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## **Abstract**

*Today, a live concert no longer necessarily presents a temporal or physical correspondence between the sound and its production, though it continues to promise an experience characterized by immediacy. In this article, we approach this paradox through analysis, participatory observation, and interviews with audience members from a concert with Norwegian artist Susanne Sundfør. We conclude that an audience can accept huge discrepancies between auditory and visual information, as long as the music's core auditory elements are convincingly communicated and represented visually on stage. This "mediated immediacy" is an important aspect of the live concert experience in contemporary technology-reliant genres.*

## **Keywords**

Live Music, Performance, Audio-Visual, Mediation, Technology

## Introduction

Over the past thirty years, live music performance has undergone considerable technological development. As a result, it is no longer a given that a live concert will present either a temporal or a physical correspondence between the sound that is heard and its production. In contemporary genres based upon digital tools for music production, one might instead encounter a musical performance whose soundscape has been partly or entirely pre-produced—that is, created and “completed” at a place and time that are distinct from the shared space and time of the performance itself. This development introduces a logical-sensorial rupture: one can hear a sound but not see its original source. This rupture raises several further issues. First, it is a bit of a paradox that the live-music format, to a greater and greater extent, is characterized by its physical and temporal distance from the actual production of the sound, though it continues to promise the audience an experience characterized by *immediacy*. Second, one might well wonder about the role that the relationship between what one sees and what one hears—that is, between sound and vision—plays in the reception of a contemporary live-music event. How does the audience experience the fact that they hear a lot of things that they do not see? Alternatively, what is the effect of seeing musical action on the stage that has no audible consequences?

In this article, we approach these questions through analysis and participatory observation at a concert with the Norwegian artist Susanne Sundfør that took place in Oslo on April 28, 2012, as well as focus-group interviews with several audience members. Sundfør is a singer-songwriter who combines a strikingly processed, electronic pop sound with traditional rock band instruments such as guitar, bass, keyboards, and drums, as well as classical arrangements played by a chamber

orchestra. In Sundfør's live performances, this complex soundscape is presented and performed by just six musicians. We start by addressing the significance of mediation for the experience of live music in different genres and contexts, as well as the ways in which the relationship between the visual and auditory dimensions of the live performance might influence this mediation. We then start our investigation of the concert by describing the recorded version of Sundfør's music and the stage setup of her concerts, before moving on to the audience's experience of different aspects of the live performance. We focus in particular on the lack of correspondence between the audible and the visual events centered upon the stage.

### **Mutations of Live: Theoretical Perspectives**

#### *Recorded Live and Live but Recorded*

One crucial difference between live and recorded formats is the real-time aspect of a live performance. Because there is simultaneity between the music's unfolding and the audience's experience of it, there is no erase or undo button in a live context. However, according to Simon Emmerson, this real-time aspect is not enough—there must be an accompanying *physical* presence for us to feel that we are witnessing something actually *live*. For this to be the case, he claims, it requires a positive answer to the following question: “Am I getting a personal response?” (Emmerson “What is live”). Elsewhere, in turn, he describes live music as an experience of “living presence” (Emmerson *Living*, chapter 1). A live event would thus appear to require both simultaneity in time and the physical co-presence of audience and performer(s), and Peters (“Witnessing”) likewise sees these as prerequisites for what he describes as

the paradigmatic case of the live experience. However, in practice, there are many hybrid formats and contrasting attempts at sustaining a sense of immediacy, even when essential dimensions of this paradigmatic case might be missing. In the case of music, notable examples include recordings of concerts and concerts broadcast live on the radio, TV, or Internet.

An interesting variant, in addition, is recording live in the studio, which purports to manifest, in sound, the interaction between performers in real time. As Porcello (“Music Mediated”) has pointed out regarding the so-called Austin sound, however, the production and post-production of a sound that sounds live actually involves multi-tracking, editing, and other studio-related (that is, decidedly *not* live) practices. These measures are necessary in order to produce a trustworthy impression of the energy and sound of a live event. Somewhat paradoxically, such studio achievements are, in the case of the live record—that is, a recording that attempts to document a live event, whether on stage or in the studio—made possible by the temporal disjunction between performance, editing, and (eventually) listening. The production of live recordings specifically directs our attention to the fact that this particular intensity often has to be cultivated or “added” during the post-production process—for example, through highlighting the sonic markers (Askerøi) of sound-producing processes, such as breathing, bow strokes, grunts, and so on.

In other words, that a concert *de facto* is live is no guarantee that we will *experience* it as live.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the fact that a live recording has to go through a lot of post-production in order to sound live testifies to the importance of “live” as an *aesthetic* quality, or, put differently, to the live format’s ability to provide the

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<sup>1</sup> Maasø shows how sampling and other sound production techniques were used in order to produce a high-quality live sound on TV in the 1990s (193–213).

experiential and, some would claim, essential quality that we label “liveness” (Auslander). Playing live, then, is clearly more than just playing there and then in front of an audience: it is about generating a feeling of liveness, in the sense of an immediate “living presence” that often takes the form of a special intensity in the moment.

### *Liveness and Mediation*

The extreme use of pre-programmed and pre-recorded—that is, pre-produced—elements on stage has been framed as a threat to the experience of a live concert as live. In recent years, however, artists have become more and more ingenious about bringing pre-produced musical content onto the live music stage. This use of pre-produced material is widespread and takes place in all genres, though acceptance of this trend varies greatly among fans and artists alike. In electronic dance music, for example, all aspects of the sound, even the vocals, can be prefabricated without any perceived impact upon the quality of the live performance (see Helseth; Kjus, and Danielsen). In rock, on the other hand, the use of prefabricated elements on stage is generally viewed as inauthentic or weak. In particular, the use of pre-recorded lead vocals is completely unacceptable in many genres, including pop, where the use of other pre-produced material is widespread.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Auslander on the so-called Milli Vanilli scandal, or the discussion sparked by the use of live auto-tuning on the television program *X Factor* (see Kaufman, Gil. “Simon Cowell’s ‘X Factor’ Embroiled in Auto-Tune Controversy.” *MTV News*, August 24, 2010. Accessed September 5, 2014.

<http://www.mtv.com/news/1646358/simon-cowells-x-factor-embroiled-in-Auto->

As Simon Frith has pointed out, ideological notions in rock concerning the use of technology on stage generally imply that the more “raw” or “uncooked” the musical expression, the more authentic or expressive it is (Frith 266). Generally, genre differences are also profound in terms of the acceptable *means* of technological mediation—that is, ways of technologically manipulating and processing sound. To mediate is to supply the means of conveying something from A to B, and music always involves mediation of one kind or another. Primary mediating instances for acoustic music include the physical body of an instrument or a human being and the characteristics of the room in which the sound is uttered. However, we do not often think of these instances as mediation but rather as part of the sound per se. Mediating *technology*, on the other hand, is generally associated with the use of electric and electronic equipment. While we acknowledge the fact that the technology of acoustic instruments also plays an important mediating role in sound production, we will here reserve the term *technological mediation* for processes involving electric and electronic devices. These processes might range from the microphone or amplifier that colors the sound in a particular way to the more elaborate, even strategic machinations of digital sound editing, programming, and processing. Today, such mediation is ubiquitous in both live and recorded music formats, in all of the genres, and in each of the stages involved in making music, from creation to consumption. Brøvig-Hanssen has categorized the mediating process used in music-making into four stages: (1) the initial mediation of aural raw material that takes place in the voice/human body, traditional instruments, samplers, software instruments, drum

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Tune-controversy/). For a more thorough discussion of different forms of use of Auto-Tune in contemporary pop and hip-hop, see Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen *Digital Signatures*, chapter 7.

machines, and so on; (2) the means of mediation used to record and edit or process sounds, such as microphones, amplifiers, mixing consoles, editing tools, processing effects, and so on; (3) phonograms and media formats (LP, CD, MD, DAT, MP3, radio, and so on); and (4) the medium of distribution (format readers and senders, amplifiers, cables, speakers, the listening context, and so on) (Brøvig-Hanssen 160).<sup>3</sup> Mediation at stage 1 is, as mentioned above, often experienced as part of the sound source. Mediation at stages 3 and 4 is, on the other hand, viewed as situated outside of the music “itself,” despite the fact that formats, distribution media, and so forth often have a considerable impact on both creative choices and sound quality. Stage 2, in short, is where one tends to experience the impact of technological mediation in the traditional sense—that is, as something that is *applied to the sound*.

Experiencing the presence of mediation requires that one recognize the effect produced by the means, or medium. Put differently, mediating processes can be either *transparent* or *opaque* for the listener, and through the term opaque mediation, Brøvig-Hanssen foregrounds the way in which mediating technology can be exposed so that aspects of the mediating process itself command the listener’s attention. Opaque mediation seeks to expose “the material traces of the mediation’s self-presentation” (Brøvig-Hanssen 162); transparent mediation, on the other hand, refers to “a use of mediating technology that the listener can completely ignore” (159). One of Brøvig-Hanssen’s main points is that transparency of mediation should not be mistaken for *absence* of mediation. In rock-related genres, for example, standard real-time mediation, such as the use of microphones, amplifiers, compression, delay, reverb, and EQ, is used both in the studio and on stage, and when it is relatively

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<sup>3</sup> Such analytical classifications are, of course, not absolute and often overlap, but they are still helpful in establishing the focus of the following discussions.

discreet, it does not undermine the music's "liveness." Instead, these aspects are typically heard as "belonging" to the performer and his or her signature sound, and they will normally be present whether the performer is working in a live setting or in the studio. Generally, the positioning of the dividing line between those means of mediation that are regarded as part of the sound source and those that are not depends upon both genre and instrument. In rock and metal genres, distortion, for example, is regarded as part of the sound source when used on the guitar but is experienced as applied to the sound when used on the vocals.

### *Adding a Visual Dimension*

In this article, we will focus on opaque technological mediation, in terms of both real-time sound processing and the use of pre-produced elements, in live performance.<sup>4</sup> There are various expectations regarding the use of technology when playing live versus working on a recording. First of all, the norms surrounding the use of technology are not the same. Next, the impression made by the use of technology changes as a consequence of the multimodal character of a live performance. The live performance adds a visual aspect to the sound, and the relationship between the auditory and the visual influences how the audience experiences the presence of

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, artists in all music genres use various forms of pre-production prior to a performance. Some of this effort involves technological mediation and some does not (in jazz, for example, the set list of songs is pre-produced; in electronic dance music, it might be devised on the spot). The question as to what is acceptable and non-acceptable means of pre-production in a live musical setting thus vary considerably with genre.

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technological mediation, as well as the live performance as a whole.

Generally, people try to combine information from the different senses in a meaningful way. This ability is either innate or developed very early on (Bahrick and Pickens, Spelke “Infants” and “Perceiving”; Spelke, Born, and Chu), and research into multimodal perception in children and adults has shown that audiovisual synchronicity contributes to the development of a coupling of auditory and visual information (Lewkowicz “Perception” and “Development”). Still such couplings can be weak or strong and music technologies clearly accommodate them in different ways. In acoustic instruments, in particular, action-sound couplings are based on mechanical laws and are therefore easier to grasp, while the action-sound relationships found in electronic instruments are designed and constructed electronically. According to Jensenius, electronic instruments over time establish a relationship between action and sound that feels natural, but ‘it is questionable whether our perception of them may ever be as strong as that of a coupling’ Jensenius (181).

In a classic experiment, McGurk and McDonald showed that, for adults, information from the visual domain tends to consistently overrule information from the auditory domain, if the two are synchronized. Of course, in the context of a live music concert, the auditory information is often primary, because the sound is understood to be the point of departure for the whole performance. The visual aspects of a live concert are seen as supporting the communication of the auditory aspects. This varies to an extent by genre, but when we are dealing with genres in which the music is seen to come first, which is clearly the case with Susanne Sundfør’s particular mix of jazz, classical, and pop aesthetics, visual aspects are likely to be regarded as supplementary to the auditory aspects. Still, several studies of multimodal

music perception show that seeing what the musicians are doing increases the perceived expressivity of a performance (see, for example, Davidson “Visual Perception” and “The Role of the Body”; Broughton and Stevens; Huang and Krumhansl).

When a visual aspect is added to the sound of the music, we naturally think first of the sound source. Who or what is producing the sounds we hear? As Eric F. Clarke makes clear, “the primary function of auditory perception is to discover what sounds are the sound *of*, and what to do about them” (Clarke 3). Conversely, the identification of potential sound sources on stage will most likely generate expectations for particular auditory events and attract our attention to the associated parts of the soundscape. The visibility of computers in a live electronic-music concert, for example, foregrounds the technological tools (and mediating processes) that were most likely used to produce the sound. In fact, the experience of opaque and transparent dimensions of mediation, in a live context, can arise from various intersections of the auditory and visual domains.

The music discussed below is situated at the crossroads of contemporary technology-based jazz, electro-pop, and classical music, and people’s expectations for its live performance will revolve around the appearance of a number of traditional instruments on stage. At the same time, however, technological mediation is ubiquitous in this sound, and the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable uses of technology in this live setting is very different from rock. In fact, substantial parts of this soundscape cannot be traced back to an easily identifiable sound source. In what follows, we investigate how this mixture of “live” and recorded sound affects the live music experience. In particular, we focus on the role of the relationship

between what one sees and what one hears—that is, between sound and vision—in the reception of this contemporary live-music event.

### *Methods*

As mentioned above, the soundscape of Sundfør's music is characterized by a complex combination of acoustic and electronic elements. In Sundfør's live performances, this soundscape is presented and performed by six musicians, all of whom play more than one instrument. Our empirical point of departure is participatory observation and focus-group interviews with audience members from a Sundfør concert in Oslo on April 28, 2012, that was part of her European tour for her newly released album *The Silicone Veil* (Sonnet Sound). By attending the concert, we experienced firsthand its distinctive character/atmosphere, its order of events, and its stage design. Sundfør's live setup consists of, among other things, a cello, lead (Sundfør) and backing vocals, a vibraphone, several synthesizers, a guitar, a bass, and drums/percussion. As audience members, we were able to explore the mediation processes underlying the soundscape, and the ways in which the music was presented and communicated live, in terms of the stage setup.

In order to plumb the audience experience in more depth, we conducted a semi-structured focus-group interview with three people who attended the concert to better understand the concert experience from the audience's point of view (Kvale and Brinkmann). The informants have different backgrounds, both regarding their professional career and their knowledge of music. They are all active music listeners and concert-goers. One informant is a semi-professional musician. Their age ranges from twenty-three to thirty-five years old. The interview was conducted less than a

week after the concert and focused on how the informants experienced the soundscape, as well as whether and to what extent the technological mediation and pre-produced elements affected their concert experience. We also looked at what our informants found to be distinctive about the concert. We hoped that the interaction among them would produce a nuanced and varied discussion about an experience that was decidedly not quotidian but rather relatively exotic and elusive. In the context of a focus group, one informant's statements and reflections can stir memories or prompt associations in others. Focus group interviews may thus create a broad and diverse discussion and revitalize lost memories of the concert in the informants. In what follows, the informants have been assigned the following pseudonyms: Siri (twenty-three years old), Ingrid (twenty-five years old), and Magnus (thirty-five years old).

### **“Being There When It Happens”: An Empirical Investigation of the Audiovisual Concert Experience**

*The Concert: Susanne Sundfør at Rockefeller, April 28, 2012*

Sundfør's last European tour concert in conjunction with the newly released *Silicone Veil* album took place at Rockefeller Music Hall, one of the biggest and most important concert venues in Oslo, accommodating about 1,350 people. The hall is somewhat dark and has an industrial character; it includes three bars, several lounges, some side rooms, and a gallery. Besides being a concert venue, it also has a social function as a place to hang out. Rockefeller was very crowded at this specific concert, which was doubtlessly sold out. When the support band (named Bow to Each Other), started to play, it was soon apparent that the audience consisted of music-oriented

listeners who came to this concert primarily for the music experience. Even before the concert started, most of the audience was focused on the stage.

Sundfør's set started with the instrumental song "Meditation in an Emergency," from the aforementioned album *The Silicone Veil*. At this point, there were no musicians on stage, and the only indication that the concert had even started was the unmistakable string arrangement from the song. Though it was not one of the more well-known songs from the album, most in the audience seemed to recognize it. Toward the end of the song, the members of the band came on stage, one by one, to great applause, though there was a lull before they began playing again, and the audience actually seemed to drift a bit. On stage, the lighting was dim, and after a time, the audience heard a very faint, dark, almost synthetic tone. The sound was reminiscent of a technical error, but the true Sundfør fans immediately registered the characteristic opening of the song "Diamonds," the first track on *The Silicone Veil*. After a few seconds, Sundfør's distinctive voice soared over the somewhat diffuse droning sound, and then the stage lighting started to flicker and then flash. The visual impression, then, was just as diffuse as the musical elements, and both grew more energetic and more distinctly rhythmic.

The stage setup consisted of a multitude of instruments. Most visually obvious were four synthesizers, a Hammond organ, a drum set, and a vibraphone, but the main focus was always on Sundfør and her vocal performance. The five other musicians played several different instruments each—two of them, for example, sang backing vocals while playing the cello, one of the synthesizers, and the vibraphone, respectively. Sundfør herself also played several instruments, including a Hammond organ and a synthesizer. Her gaze was therefore rarely directed at the audience on the floor of the concert hall, though a spotlight mounted on the Hammond organ threw

cold blue light onto her face as she played it, making her more visible there and even giving her a supernatural appearance. Behind the band was a large, white grid, resembling an enlarged spider web that recalled the album cover for *The Silicone Veil*. The white grid also provided further lighting effects, changing its character and mood as different lights were projected onto it. The lighting of the stage was clearly used to emphasize and highlight the musical character of the performance, whether rhythmic and even frantic or calm and collected.

Sundfør is thought to be a relatively anonymous performer on stage, but at this concert she surprised everyone several times with her energetic dance movements. On the new album's title song, for example, Sundfør's dancing powerfully underpinned the rhythmic structure of the song. Interestingly, the audience generally remained still, standing and listening rather than dancing along with her, even when she encouraged them all to move with her.

### *From Recorded to Live*

On *The Silicone Veil*, as mentioned earlier, Sundfør combines a strikingly processed electronic pop sound with traditional pop band instruments (guitar, bass, synthesizers, and drums), as well as classical arrangements played by the Norwegian chamber orchestra TrondheimSolistene [Trondheim Soloists]. Though Sundfør's music relies upon a combination of acoustic and electronic sound elements, the immediate impression of the *recorded* version of her music is that there is little mediating technology as such. This may be due to the way in which the electronic sound elements unfold in the background, behind a "natural," acoustic soundscape filled with strings, singing, and traditional instruments. These foregrounded elements

appear unimpacted by mediating technology, in part because they are characterized by mediation processes that are by now naturalized as “part of” the recording—that is, one no longer registers this technology’s aesthetic and qualitative effect upon the sound (Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen ”The Naturalised and the Surreal”). Sundfør’s distinctive voice reveals audible technological mediation, thanks to the somewhat unorthodox use of a medium-sized reverb, but she has done this for so long that it has become part of her signature sound rather than a technological effect as such.

The electronic sound aesthetic in Sundfør’s music, on the other hand, displays a more opaque use of music technology; in an interview, Sundfør explained that she “wants the music to sound a bit synthetic” (Sundfør, in Kydland 42). Instead of trying to disguise its impact, then, the surreal soundscape in her music tends to highlight the presence (and value) of music technology.

As stressed above, the experience of technological mediation can change when a visual dimension is added to the music in a live performance, so that, for example, several of the sound sources become visible. In accordance with her genre’s expectations, Sundfør’s live setup reflects the album’s complexity and diversity of expression quite well. However, the visual aspect of the live performance almost unavoidably emphasizes some parts of the soundscape over others. Sundfør and her voice, of course, attract much attention. Likewise, several traditional instruments were visually present, including the percussion, synthesizers, a cello, and the vibraphone. The purely computer-based sound processes, on the other hand, became more or less subsumed in the overall visual impression of musicians with instruments; there is a general visual absence of pre-production or sound-processing tools, such as, for example, computers or effects racks. In other words, though they remained highly present in the auditory domain of the concert (as they are on the recording), the pre-

produced and processed parts of the soundscape were not very evident in the concert's visual domain.

The ways in which the sonic experience corresponds to the visual aspects are clearly important for the establishment of a trustworthy live performance, even though the perceived validity of the correspondence differs from instrument to instrument. As mentioned, first and foremost, it was important that one could both hear and see that Sundfør was actually singing live. The technological mediation of this vocal performance was very discreet, leaving the audience with an overall impression of vocals that were not being significantly manipulated—at least not so as to threaten the experience of witnessing a “here and now” production of an expressive vocal performance. The abovementioned traditional instruments, that is, percussion, synthesizers, and acoustic instruments such as cello and vibraphone, also contributed to validating the live character or nature of the event.

Generally, the visual representation of a sound source simplifies the process of linking it to its sound and dismissing the impact of any technological mediation. Yet it is also true that adding a visual dimension to a given musical work foregrounds those sound sources that are heard but *not* represented, thanks to their *absence* on stage but not in the soundscape. In such situations, what were perceived as transparently mediated aspects of the soundscape in the recorded version of the music (such as the sound of acoustic instruments) will become opaque when transferred to a live situation, because hearing an *acoustic* instrument without seeing it on stage is stranger than hearing an electronic element without perceiving its source. Particularly striking at the Sundfør concert was the way in which the sonically “unmediated” chamber-orchestra arrangements played by TrondheimSolistene became the most “produced” as part of the *audiovisual* context. Apparently untouched by technological mediation

in the recorded version of the song, the sound of the chamber orchestra became almost surreal when played back on a computer as part of the live performance, since the audience could clearly hear a chamber orchestra but could not see it.

As mentioned above, Sundfør's singing is experienced as more or less transparently mediated in the recorded version, and this held true for the most part at the concert, though there were times when it also came forward as opaque, particularly when one could hear Sundfør's distinctive voice doubling itself. This doubling of the lead vocal is an effect that, in the context of recorded music, has become naturalized mostly because we have become so familiar with the spatiotemporal disjunctions of multitrack recording.<sup>5</sup> In the real time of a live performance, however, this effect is not perceived as somehow "natural," because it is impossible to sing polyphonically with oneself. This aspect of Sundfør's vocal became prominently opaque at the concert due to the discrepancy between the auditory (two singers) and the visual (one singer) information emerging from the stage.

These examples show how audiovisual contexts can bring aspects of technological mediation to the fore as a consequence of ruptures between what one sees and what one hears. How do audience members react to such ruptures, however, and how do audiovisual relationships in general affect their live experience?

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of the spatiotemporal disjunctions of multitrack recording, see Brøvig-Hanssen "Music in Bits", chapter 2.

## *Audience Members' Experiences of the Audiovisual Performance*

Generally, the addition of a visual dimension to an auditory experience has a positive effect on the audience's concert experience. As experimental research into audiovisual aspects of music performance has showed, the visual emphasis of expressive aspects of the music enhances them (Davidson "Visual Perception" and "The role of the body"; Clarke and Davidson; Broughton and Stevens; Huang and Krumhansl). But what happens when the visual does not correspond with the auditory but instead evokes a logical-sensorial rupture?

Our informant Ingrid (twenty-five years old) reflected on the Sundfør concert in light of a previous concert experience where the entire soundscape was produced by a computer, which introduced a profound discrepancy between what she heard (a huge and complex soundscape) and what she saw (one person and one computer). She talked about how this challenged her perception and understanding of the music. Siri (twenty-three) followed up by noting that the concert with Sundfør put "a face to the different sound sources, as opposed to just a person who uses a computer and pushes some buttons." Magnus (thirty-five), on the other hand, expressed his concern about the opposite logical rupture, where the visual aspect of the performance appears to supply information that he is not able to trace sonically:

When they stroke that marimba,<sup>6</sup> and it didn't result in any sound, it was kind of like, "Why do you strike that instrument, when I hear nothing anyway?" That element was kind of irritating. I could see it was an instrument, I could see that they played on it, but I couldn't

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<sup>6</sup> The informant speaks about a marimba, but the instrument he is referring to was a vibraphone.

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hear anything. And for me, it was kind of like the left part of the stage became imbalanced in relation to the overall impression of the sound.

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Magnus also pointed to how the visual representation of the music at times made it difficult to distinguish between what was played there and then, and what was only a recording activated by pushing a button:

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Because there were so many synthesizers there . . . It is a little difficult to decide whether it is just a recording and they only push a button, or if they actually do a greater effort playing on it. It is more difficult to know if it really is live or if it is a recording. And it doesn't really matter.

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Ingrid agreed with Magnus here, explaining that she also lost track of the many elements in the complex soundscape and their correspondence to the six musicians and the many instruments on the stage.

An interesting question in this context, and one that the informants also raised themselves, is whether this presence / absence of visible sound sources had any significant effect upon their concert experience. Magnus responded first:

I remember the cello because I could see the cello, but if it merely had been a recorded cello, I kind of would have accepted it anyway. If it had been a rhythm box instead of percussion, I would have accepted that as well. And since it was a marimba [vibraphone] there, I was annoyed by the fact that I could not hear that it was played on. If they only had had it [the marimba sound] in the music instead—electronically—I would not have thought about it. Then it would have been a part of the overall soundscape, and I would have accepted it for what it was . . . then we would still have had four, five people present at the stage, which I believe gave me something.

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While the visual presence of an instrument makes Magnus notice that instrument, he was quite open as to how different sounds might be represented on stage. He seemed generally less concerned about what aspects of the sound were actually made visual, as long as there are “people present at the stage.”

Along those lines, Siri described how her concert experience generally focused on Sundfør as an artist, and especially her voice, which she heard as the core aspect of the concert. Each informant, in fact, distinguished core from supplementary aspects of the experience of the soundscape, and the visual element played a decisive role in this calculation. Because she could *see* someone playing percussion during the concert, Ingrid reported that she focused on the rhythmic character of the music in particular: “I kind of feel that it becomes like a core in the music.”

At this point, Magnus and Ingrid slightly disagreed with each other, probably due to their differing preferences and expectations. Magnus describes how he expected the concert to be more seamless regarding the overlap between songs, expectations that likely grew out of his intimacy with the electronica genre:

I had expected it to be more seamless throughout the concert, because when it comes to this type of music, I expect things to overlap . . . But at this concert, it was more like one song, and then a song, and then a song, and so on.

Ingrid noted that this was all about personal expectations regarding both the music and the concert experience. For her, there was great value in seeing the music being created there and then, and she compared a concert experience to the experience of ordering juice at a café:

If it says “fresh juice” and you can see that they actually have squeezed the juice, it tastes a lot better than if you buy it on a box where it says that it is freshly squeezed juice.

▲.....  
She expected a concert to provide her with something real and trustworthy—something that happened at a certain time and place and was therefore at once exclusive and perishable, in a sense. Seeing Sundfør’s music being played and created made her feel like she was experiencing something that was genuine and fresh, evoking Peters’s arguments about the value of witnessing an event “here and now” in relation to both “the power of real-time” (Peters 719) and to the physical presence, understood as access to something genuine and authentic. Ingrid prized the feeling of “being there when it happens,” seeing and hearing the physical effort that lies behind the particular sound, in terms of her aesthetic satisfaction and experience of “authenticity.”

Generally, then, it would appear that the sight of six musicians on stage creating music supplies an overall impression that one is seeing what one is hearing, even though the actual correspondence between sound and vision might be rather loose and even obscured by the musicians and their many instruments. Of course, this situation can also produce logical ruptures: (1) one can see the respective sound source but not hear the sound it produces, or (2) one can hear a sound but be unable to associate it with a visible sound source. Computer-based and manipulated sound elements are typically more difficult to trace back to a definite origin than more traditional instruments, and the lack of an adequate visual representation of many of these sound elements seems to marginalize them in terms of an audience member’s admittedly limited scope of attention.

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### *Visualization as a Symbolic Representation of Sound*

Earlier, we discussed the fact that the sound of the chamber orchestra in Sundfør's recording, when made a part of her live concert, foregrounded her use of prefabricated material live because of the absence of a real chamber orchestra on stage.

Interestingly, this did not introduce any particularly acute logical-sensorial rupture among our informants, who seemed willing to allow the lone cello to represent the sound of the obviously larger group and in turn strengthen the experience of that specific part of the soundscape. This same flexibility extended to Ingrid's experience of watching someone playing percussion on stage. The audible rhythmic and percussive soundscape of the live concert was clearly a combination of pre-produced and live percussion, and the concert's live percussive elements were obviously only a part of that fabric. Nevertheless, the sight of a musician playing percussion prompted Ingrid to experience it as a core aspect of the music. As Magnus pointed out, one generally accepts pre-produced music in a live concert situation, provided that the main elements of the soundscape are somehow represented visually. The presence of the musicians and the various instruments come to *symbolically* represent the diversity of the soundscape, rather than actually supply that diversity.

An important factor here is the performers' ability to direct listeners through the sounding music. As Broughton and Stevens point out, "The performer's movement could highlight and guide the observer through their interpretation of affective and structural content" (Broughton and Stevens 139, see also Vines et al). Though Sundfør's musicians did not create the entire soundscape there and then, they were able to convey the most important information about its emotional and structural content. This visual activity helped Ingrid, for example, navigate what she was

hearing, as opposed to her recent experience at an electronica concert with the Norwegian duo Röyksopp:

Ingrid: There, it's sort of just two guys with a computer, and it gets a little, like . . .

Magnus: Yeah, and then you don't really need to watch them.

Ingrid: Yeah, right.

Magnus stressed, in turn, that this slippage between the audible and the visual does not derive from the technical set-up of the concert as such—that is, the presence or absence of computer-based mediation—but rather from the way in which the music is presented to the audience.

One can include large amounts of electronic music as part of the backdrop, as long as it *looks* like they're doing a job of presenting the overall soundscape—that is, making an effort to actually minimize the impression that the music is purely electronic, [by] providing a live experience by being present in person.

Accordingly, Magnus noted that a large part of the Sundfør concert soundscape could have been supplied by a “synthesizer” and he still would have loved it, “because it is Susanne Sundfør with *her* voice.” As this quote makes clear, there is a limit to what can be symbolically represented if the live experience is to sustain its viability, and not surprisingly the lead vocalist and her voice is crucial here.

In sum, it would appear that a correlation between the “energy” of the audible and visual dimensions of the concert is important, and, secondly, that the visualization of the sound is very important to the experience but can be symbolic or gestural, as opposed to literal or actual. The audience's experience of liveness seems to revolve

around aesthetic rather than technical aspects of the concert, in the sense that the ways in which the musicians present, convey, and express the musical content is more impactful than the extent to which the stage set-up corresponds to the soundscape. The audience will accept a performance's reliance upon prefabricated material and technological mediation if the energy and core visual elements coincide with the auditory information, though, again, this varies somewhat according to genre and instrument.

### **Conclusion: Mediated Immediacy**

In this article, we have investigated the impact of technological mediation upon the experience of live music, with a particular focus on the relationship between visual and audible dimensions of live performance at a concert by Susanne Sundfør and her band in Oslo in 2012. We found that a de facto slippage in correspondence between the audible and the visual on stage was largely accepted by the audience. In case of the “missing” chamber orchestra, for example, a single cello seemed to provide a satisfactory stand-in—a “visualization” of the entire string part—directing attention to this aspect of the (recorded and live) sound. The success of this device demonstrates that the concertgoing audience will accept such discrepancy and still experience the performance as viably “live” when the music's core elements are represented visually on stage, one way or the other. The musicians and their various instrumental contributions may thus be said to *evoke* the overall soundscape of the music rather than to actually *create* it in the moment. The only exception to this principle, in this case, was the lead vocalist.

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Our study has shown that the immediacy of the concert experience is crucial: the live format is still essentially about witnessing a literally and figuratively outstanding event in real time. As both Peters and Emmerson argue, the power of “real time” lies in its *physical* presence, whereby the live event eludes “the ontological depreciation of being a copy” (Peters 718) and maintains its privileged position because of the direct sensational experience of what is happening (711). Watching a concert unfold introduces the pleasurable sensation that one is capturing or living the present moment more fully, because the performance will not (cannot, in fact) last and has to be sensed in the moment. Even though important aspects of the music presented at the concert might be easy to reproduce, some of them simply because they have a pre-produced character, the event as such is not repeatable. It is elusive, firmly tied to the time and place of its unfolding.

Experiencing liveness at a live concert, thus, is more a question of whether or not the concert itself is conveyed in such a way that it stands out as an emphatic event<sup>7</sup>—that is, the aesthetic experience, as a whole, is more important than any insistence that the entire soundscape is actually being created then and there. The extent to which the concert is technologically mediated or pre-produced is subordinate to this general sense of ephemeral unfolding, and, of course, the concert’s immediacy might even rely upon technological mediation, such as amplification and processing, as well as the strategic use of pre-produced elements. The Sundfør concert would in fact not have been complete without them. This form of mediated immediacy

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<sup>7</sup> For an insightful discussion of the notion of event in the sense of something that is “meant and intended to happen in a particular way, with particular effects for participants and a particular end in mind,” see Scannell 271.

ultimately rests on a balancing act: technological mediation and pre-production must never demand *too much* attention and must be adjusted appropriately to the genre and the context. If, for example, the technological mediation of the vocal attracts attention in the wrong way or the soundscape is massive and there is almost nothing going on at stage, the immediacy is threatened. In order for the audience to be continuously absorbed in the moment, there must be a reasonable correspondence between what one sees and what one hears. However, as our study also makes clear, huge discrepancies can be accepted as long as the visual dimension symbolically directs attention towards relevant aspects of the sound, and the sound, on the other hand, is not experienced as comprising crucial aspects that are visually absent.

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