

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD: TOUCH AND THE VINYL RESURGENCE

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Abstract: This article reviews a recent wave of literature on the resurgence of vinyl records, examining what it has claimed about vinyl's capacity for tangibility and the contrast to digital media, associated with intangibility. These claims are explained with reference to other literatures on touch, and it is suggested that vinyl's haptics mediates and embodies the emotionally rewarding production of a sense of self. The apparent contrast of vinyl aesthetics with classical music aesthetics is also discussed, and the presence of contemporary classical music within the vinyl resurgence is considered.

Music is often assumed to be quintessentially intangible, even valuably so. Music, that is, 'itself': travelling patterns of vibration, or even the abstracted, coded information that underlies or underwrites these vibrations in scores, brains or circuits, and which cannot be grasped literally or metaphorically, much less held, handled or stored as we might other discrete material objects. Anything else, however tangible or material, is at best subordinated to that music, merely its metonym, its packaging. Yet this was always an idea that felt more at home in Western classical music than in popular music cultures and the study of those cultures. And in recent decades, as digital technologies have come to dominate cultural production and consumption, the importance of music as a material, embodied and multi-sensory experience has been reasserted with particular fervour, especially amid anxieties over the inauthentic, even simulated nature of digital culture – 'virtual' as opposed to 'real', ephemeral as opposed to solid. In this context, touching and holding music is now considered not only possible, but vital to the most valuable experiences of it.

Of all the areas around which such arguments are made, the recent resurgence of vinyl records is perhaps the most famous, and it was spearheaded by popular music cultures, especially rock, hip hop and dance. Vinyl's apologias, aired in magazines and a recent wave of books that take up the subject,¹ are invariably framed in opposition

¹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2011); Dominik Bartmanski, and Ian Woodward, *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016); Paul E. Winters, *Vinyl Records and Analog Culture in the Digital Age: Pressing Matters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016); Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters: A Manifesto from Musicians and Fans* (Woodbridge: ACC Editions, 2017); John Corbett, *Vinyl Freak: Love*

to digital technologies and are often built on models of authenticity that lack a sense of the constructed and socio-culturally relative nature of what makes art 'real', rejecting such relativism as so much post-modern, cybernetic folly. Not so Paul E. Winters' *Vinyl Records and Analog Culture in the Digital Age: Pressing Matters*, which offers a critical, nuanced analysis of vinyl's discourse of anti-digital authenticity that proceeds from the observation that 'the return to vinyl can be seen as an attempt to recapture an "authentic" aesthetic experience of which the consumption of digital media both via CD and mp3 appears to have robbed us'.²

At the other end of the spectrum is David Sax's boldly titled *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*. 'Like most music fans', Sax writes, 'I'd spent the preceding decade gradually divorcing my music collection from physical reality: loading CDs into iTunes, iTunes onto my iPhone, and eventually the whole deal into the cloud'.³ He later develops a 'modest vinyl fetish [that] tapped into something that was lying dormant since my first Napster download: the carnal pleasure of physically borrowing and buying music'.⁴ In the book's epilogue, Sax concludes that

digital is not reality. It never was and never will be. The frustrating, rough, rainy world outside of our screens is the place where our bodies and minds are at their best . . . Analog gives us the joy of creating and possessing real, tangible things in realms where physical objects and experiences are fading.⁵

For Sax, tangibility, physicality and reality are straightforward, synonymous, and are what digital technologies lack in comparison to analogue. Indie rock musician, label co-owner and critic Britt Brown goes further in *The Wire's* Collateral Damage column, in which different writers discuss the changing economies of musical production and consumption, asserting that the traditional model of the record label broke down when 'the internet supplanted physical reality'.⁶

Leaving aside the tricky question of what can be called 'reality', it must be noted that digital technologies and digital musicking are no less 'physical', or material than their analogue counterparts. Kyle Devine makes the crucial point that even an mp3 has a material basis, it is simply that 'the scale of its materiality is invisible'.⁷ Nor are digital technologies devoid of physical presence and touch: mp3 players, smartphones and computer keyboards, too, are constantly being touched. What, then, is analogue's putative physical 'reality', or its converse in digital's unreality, actually referring to?

A more appropriate term, neatly naming a distinct plane of user engagement without recourse to 'reality' or its conflation with a particular method of encoding information, is 'virtuality'. As Mark Grimshaw explains, virtuality is neither new nor special to digital technologies:

Terms such as virtual world, virtual environment, virtual character, and virtual reality and their application and usage may well be ingrained in the modern digital consciousness but thinking about virtuality has a history almost as long

Letters to a Dying Medium (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Damon Krukowski, *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* (London: MIT Press, 2017).

² Winters, *Vinyl Records and Analog Culture*, p. 46.

³ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, p. ix

⁴ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, p. x

⁵ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, pp. 237, 238.

⁶ Britt Brown, 'Collateral Damage', *The Wire* 384 (February 2016), p. 17.

⁷ Kyle Devine, 'Decomposed: A Political Ecology of Music', *Popular Music*, 34/3 (2015), p. 379. See also Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 6, pp. 184–226.

as that of Western civilization itself. Digital technology simply provides new ways to conceptualize, to use, and to experience that virtuality.⁸

It is not that audio experienced through mp3 or streaming services is not 'real', it is that it – the 'music itself', if we must – is manipulated as a virtual object in a virtual space, one not all that unlike the virtual space of the stave and the notated objects that inhabit it, or indeed that of a musical performance (re)constructed in the imagination during listening itself. This has not stopped vinyl's apologists building an aesthetics of the medium based on various forms of an exclusive, realist authenticity. Among them, vinyl's capacity for haptic experience has been given as a key aspect of its appeal and 'reality', and it is one of the most persuasive: firstly because a haptics of virtual objects 'themselves' (as opposed to through keyboards, controllers, screens and so on) has yet to become a commonly accepted component of virtual experiences beyond the smattering of wired gloves in specialist contexts and fiction, and secondly because touch, as we will see, has regularly been regarded as uniquely placed to authenticate 'reality', and provide strong emotional experiences in doing so.

The first of John Corbett's 'nine explanations for the vinyl revival' is given as 'music as a physical object'. He explains that 'records are the stuff of music . . . Many listeners long to have something to hold and look at and read . . . LPs have enjoyed a haptic history, chapter upon chapter of tactility – the weight, texture, and surface'.⁹ The second explanation, 'material collectability', largely repeats the point, adding that images associated with digital releases are 'always accessed via the screen, so they are virtual, not material, ephemeral, not solid'. Immediately after this, he fondly describes the haptics of

the record collector's technique: hands poised as if typing, fingertips resting on the first LPs, flipping them forward, eventually anchoring the meat of the palm on the closest ones while moving on toward row's end; an inquiry appears, one is extracted, examined, then replaced, and the beat goes on.¹⁰

Similarly, Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward see vinyl's tangibility as unique and the key source of its difference from the 'digital interfaces' of 'today':

If music is something uniquely abstract and seemingly immaterial because it is invisible, then vinyl comes possibly the closest to materializing music in a directly palpable and observable way. A record revolving on a turntable is music materialized, visualized, sculpted. Not only can we see tracks and their structure in the micro-architecture of the groove. We can also touch it. Music on vinyl is eminently tactile . . . It is precisely the haptics of analogue records that distinguishes them today more than ever. It is the haptics that makes analogue pragmatics so different and unique when compared with digital interfaces.¹¹

Aligning vinyl's tactile possibilities with its visual ones (relating to the 12-inch record's greater size), Jennifer Otter Bickerdike writes that with the switch to digital, 'the personal music collection had become compacted to invisibility, existing only as a title scrolling across a screen. What was missing for the true aficionado was the physical component: the story, the package, the multi-stimulus explosion offered by the record.'¹² Nineteenth-century appeals to the purity of

⁸ Mark Grimshaw, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality*, ed. Mark Grimshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

⁹ Corbett, *Vinyl Freak*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Corbett, *Vinyl Freak*, p. 11.

¹¹ Bartmanski and Woodward, *Vinyl*, p. 30.

¹² Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 11. Corbett makes a very similar case, adding that, 'my proclivity has always been toward material culture': Corbett, *Vinyl Freak*, p. 7.

absolute music are turned upside down, and music's multi-sensory physicality is held up beyond even arguments regarding sound quality to explain vinyl's newfound value, here by Bartmanski and Woodward:

Auditory warmth, richness and the much-vaunted high fidelity of the musical message account for vinyl's lasting and its air of 'holy script' for serious music aficionados. But these factors alone can hardly explain its rather explosive and quite widespread contemporary resurgence as well as its curious timing. We see it as a 'holistic' renaissance of the *concrete aesthetic object* at a time when screen-based digitization of culture can be claimed to have reached critical mass and speed. This curiously timed resurgence speaks volumes about the continued relevance of tangible objectifications, communal experiences, and personal rituals in our cultural life.¹³

Though vinyl's objecthood is allotted particular significance, this passage neatly summarises the various claims made for vinyl's benefits amid its resurgence. Some are relatively extricable from haptics, such as the arguments surrounding sound quality that Bartmanski and Woodward allude to, which is typically that the distortion and compression inherent in recording to vinyl gives the sound a desirable 'warmth'. The reference to 'fidelity' to a musical message or 'holy script' aptly expresses vinyl apologists' tendency to justify the medium's authenticity along similar lines to the historically informed performance movement, namely that vinyl was how the music was originally made, heard and intended. But even defences of vinyl's surface noise (rare before the advent of the CD) along the lines that it indexes historicity and realism, or is now exotically archaic, imply a haptics to some degree. A 'surface' is what you touch, or rather, in the case of vinyl, should *not* touch, lest you damage or dirty it in such a way as to increase surface noise, a process that is nevertheless inevitable. As such, records must be held a certain way. Analogue devices themselves are more obviously concatenations of objects in motion and contact – the prerequisites of touch – then their digital successors; as Damon Krukowski puts it, 'analog sound reproduction is tactile. It is, in part, a function of friction: the needle bounces in the groove, the tape drags across a magnetic head.'¹⁴

The operation of the vinyl machine is the 'personal ritual' that Bartmanski and Woodward allude to above, and it has become typical of literature on vinyl's appeal, especially in Bickerdike's *Why Vinyl Matters*, a collection of interviews with music industry professionals which, among the sources referred to here, best represents the recent homogenisation of narratives concerning vinyl's merits. The 'ritual' occurs thus: the record is selected, pulled from the shelf, removed from its sleeve, handled with care and respect, placed over the spindle, the needle is lowered, the music begins, and the listener listens attentively, often with the sleeve and any accompanying materials held in their hands. A frequent prequel to the narrative is the discovery of the music or the record over the radio, in the music press, or, especially, in a shop, sometimes deep in the 'crates' of a dedicated emporium, then taking it home and unwrapping it. The story is invariably told autobiographically, often nostalgically, it being charmingly different to how musical consumption works now, it is assumed. It is frequently related to the building and maintenance of a record collection, given as another of vinyl's appeals, being an embodiment and projection of one's taste, history and identity and an invitation to hunt down esoteric or valuable items. Though the story is usually told from the

¹³ Bartmanski and Woodward, *Vinyl*, p. 166.

¹⁴ Krukowski, *The New Analog*, p. 89

perspective of an individual, the social aspect of vinyl is emphasised, particularly in the form of the record shop. At every point, these rituals involve haptics.

Talking to Bickerdike, frontman of hardcore punk band Black Flag Henry Rollins asserts that 'there is something great about getting the record out of its sleeve, putting it on the turntable, getting up, turning it over, etc. I have always enjoyed the physicality of listening to records'.¹⁵ Karen Emanuel, founder of music manufacture and supply agency Key Production, tells Bickerdike that 'nothing beats picking up a piece of 12-inch vinyl and feeling it, touching it, reading the liner notes. It's iconic'.¹⁶ When Bickerdike asks director of the Rough Trade label and record shops Stephen Godfroy her routine autobiographical question about the interviewee's 'first vinyl memory', Godfroy recalls that he 'loved the haptic feedback and precision required in removing a record from its sleeve and playing it as carefully as possible'.¹⁷ Making one of the many references in *Why Vinyl Matters* to listening between generations (the ancestors' habits, the descendants' ignorance and their necessary initiation), musician and DJ Clint Boon uses a thought-provoking analogy:

The nicest part is getting the record out, putting it on, showing the kids where the stylus goes, dropping the needle in to the groove and watching it play. It's the whole ceremony of it; it's still a beautiful thing. It's like the difference between visiting your grandmother, actually going over and sitting with her and having a cup of tea, or just phoning her up or sending a postcard. It's a different experience. Listening to an mp3 isn't the same as sitting down and listening to an entire side of the first Velvet Underground album.¹⁸

Boon's aesthetics of vinyl is a matter of presence, of 'being there', and as such it strikingly echoes touch's importance as described by scientists Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence in *In Touch with the Future*, their review of research on touch and its implications for technological development:

What exactly is the difference between seeing the photos or even watching a video of one's holiday (or worse still someone else's), flicking through a holiday catalogue, and actually 'being' on holiday in the Mediterranean? Is it the feel of the hot sand on our feet? The fresh water and the warmth on our skin? The gentle breeze rustling through your hair? All of these tactile sensations contribute in a fundamental way to making for that memorable holiday experience.¹⁹

Gallace and Spence are concerned with the possibilities of touch for technological interfaces, but these possibilities are always already absent for many of those who criticise digital musicking as they promote vinyl, the former no more amounting to a visit to Grandma or a Mediterranean holiday than secondary objects would. As Portia Sabin, president of indie label Kill Rock Stars, generalises to Bickerdike (opening with an unfortunate cliché), 'kids today, they buy stuff online; you never see it, you never touch it, you never handle anything, you can't smell it'.²⁰ And without these dimensions, a listener cannot care enough about, or even 'love', the music. DJ and record producer Cut Chemist tells Bickerdike:

¹⁵ Henry Rollins, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Karen Emanuel, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 167.

¹⁷ Stephen Godfroy, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 206. Godfroy's answers read as if they were written rather than spoken, and carefully and make the case for vinyl as a contrast to the lacks and excesses of digital-age stimulation.

¹⁸ Clint Boon, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 92.

¹⁹ Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, *In Touch with the Future: The Sense of Touch from Cognitive Neuroscience to Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 8.

²⁰ Portia Sabin, in Bickerdike *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 181.

When you care this much, you need to have something released in a physical format that you love, that you can hold . . . People still want to hold tangible art – that’s important. Every day, it seems like the tactile world is being taken away from us and everything is becoming more virtual. I think it’s a fight – people are fighting to hold onto something through records. That’s awesome, that is amazing. I think people should always fight for what you can touch. I think one of the reasons people are losing their minds is because there are less and less things to touch. Without touching things, you cannot be grounded. It’s hard to love something that you cannot touch. So, when you download a song and you say, ‘I love that song’; do I think that you love it as much as someone who bought it on vinyl? No, absolutely not. Because that person can touch that song, they can hold it, they can see it, they can listen to it. With a file, it’s like, ‘Yeah I love it’. Then you forget about it. ‘Oh yeah, I had that in my hard drive! Wait, that was three hard drives ago.’²¹

Vinyl’s physicality and tactility is part of the fight against encroaching virtuality – note the simultaneously literal and metaphorical meanings of ‘hold onto something’. Six years earlier, Reynolds had made a similar argument more melancholically: ‘When music came clad in a cherishable husk of packaging and the recording medium itself had a material heft, it asserted itself as a tangible presence in your life. It was easier to form an attachment to music when it was a thing’.²²

If accounts of the love of musical media are going to be so rooted in personal history, I must intervene here. Bickerdike’s interviewees are overwhelmingly older than I, who was born in 1986 and started out with CDs (bought, borrowed, ripped, burned) and graduated with mp3s. The vast majority of my listening experiences have been on digital systems. For me, mp3s were objects with rituals of acquisition and playback, and I built a carefully curated collection of them as an iTunes library, which I have maintained on several devices. Metadata helped me personalise my collection; I would assign stars out of five and pay attention to the number of plays. One of my few five-star files was a mid-quality mp3 of Prince’s ‘I Would Die 4 U’, downloaded individually. When I arranged the library according to the number of plays, it would always come top – I never ‘touched’ the file, but I very often pressed play. Years later, when I came to download the whole of the album from which it came (*Purple Rain*) at a higher quality, I made sure to keep rather than replace my original, poorer quality copy with its metadata, adding a typed note in the song title that it was the version that I had ‘loved’. I have never even come close to loving a piece of vinyl that much. But enough millennial narcissism.

Perhaps I don’t know what vinyl was like, since I wasn’t *there*, but if there is a difference between analogue and digital forms of musical consumption, the matters of collection, connection, possession and emotional attachment present differences in degree, at most. For this reason, I struggle to agree with statements, such as those in Bickerdike’s introduction, that with the mp3,

music had become completely untethered from a physical commodity, lacking the emotional ties and cultural symbolism formerly provided by the comprehensive package . . . This loss of tangibility resulted in a chasm, wherein music history and subculture were lost . . . The quintessential need to embody, display and own a beloved work of art can’t be fulfilled by an mp3 file.²³

Yet it cannot be denied that vinyl presents a richer haptic experience than the mp3, probably the CD too, and that this haptics mediates emotional experience and even, through selection, possession and

²¹ Cut Chemist, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p 59.

²² Reynolds, *Retromania*, pp. 125, 126.

²³ Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, pp. 16, 17.

listening, the bodily and psychic boundaries of the self. Vinyl's proponents regularly cast the holding and owning of vinyl as the essence of one's 'love' for it. Bickerdike's interviewees tell her that vinyl is popular again because of 'the want and need for something beautiful to keep and hold that contains the music you love',²⁴ and that 'commanding ceremony and tactile care, the ritualised respect of the music is preordained. A vinyl record is conditioned to be loved'.²⁵ If a ceremony of love centred around tactility sounds reminiscent of a wedding (and with patriarchal connotations of ownership and being preordained, too), consider Karen Emanuel's comment to Bickerdike that vinyl is popular because 'when people are fans, they want to have and to hold'.²⁶

In literature on touch across disciplines, the touch of the one who loves and its attendant semiotics and affects are routinely discussed as having particular depth and significance. In demonstrating how touch represents not the distinction of bodies in the juxtaposition of their 'boundaries' but the possibilities for the dissolution and flexibility of boundaries, even (especially) those of the 'self', philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe notes that 'in taking hold of someone's hand, you might at first sense a clear boundary between yours and theirs. But, if you continue to hold it for a prolonged period, perhaps whilst walking together, the boundaries may well diffuse. Opposition between bounded bodies becomes diffusion of boundaries and a sense of connectedness'.²⁷ This is how a sense of self is both modified and created in relationship to the world, beings and objects around it, and in this case, it is pleasurable to do so. Thus for Ratcliffe, 'touch . . . serves to illustrate something of our relationship with the world, which is a matter of belonging and connectedness, rather than confrontation between body and object'.²⁸ This no doubt applies to attachment to vinyl, not least since vinyl is accompanied by – and chimes with theories of – music's role in identity formation as a technology of the self.²⁹ While a vinyl record is distinct from the self, and even constitutes the Other, it does merge with and reflect the self as part of a wider, distributed sense of self in the same way that one forms attachments to clothes or people, and vinyl's haptics enacts this process at a bodily level, just as one regularly touches those clothes and those people.

The sense of an embodied, distributed self, mediated by the haptics of vinyl records, is felt as personal history as well as emotion. Bickerdike is told that vinyl is important because 'it's a physical representation of you as a person . . . For me, there's a romance about it: sitting there, holding the album cover while you listen to the album'.³⁰ For a recording musician, cutting a vinyl record entails

²⁴ Julia Ruzicka (a bassist), in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 50.

²⁵ Stephen Godfroy, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 204.

²⁶ Karen Emanuel, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 167. Bickerdike's own introduction echoes this exact phrase, ending with the words 'long live the vinyl record, to have and hold': Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 17.

²⁷ Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Touch and Situatedness', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 16/3 (2008), p. 318.

²⁸ Ratcliffe, 'Touch and situatedness', p. 317.

²⁹ Among the most famous examples of such theories are those found in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2006) and Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which uses the phrase 'technology of the self'.

³⁰ Colleen Murphy (founder of the Classic Album Sundays listening events), in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 128.

‘a sense of accomplishment. You’re holding in your hand something that you guys collectively did’.³¹ For Reynolds, vinyl’s tangibility is expressed in terms of nostalgia; collecting hardcore rave vinyl became a way for him to yearn for and attempt to recover the good times: ‘it was as if grabbing hold of the tangible vinyl incarnation of the music could somehow stop time slipping through my fingers, arrest the fading of those magic memories’.³² Winters understands this effect of vinyl, and its relationship to authenticity, in terms of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical concept of *objet petit a*, quoting Sean Homer on Lacan:

‘Although the desire of the Other always exceeds or escapes the subject, there nevertheless remains something that the subject can recover and thus sustains him or herself. This something is the *objet a*’. Consequently; the *objet a* is both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality’. Expensive vinyl reissues, some in elaborate packaging, beckon discerning listeners with their historical significance, offer themselves as means to fill that gap, thus constituting the listening subject as discerning in the first place. Your experience is ‘authentic’, because you have the record to prove that it is.³³

Although Winters does not mention touch here, the vinyl apologists’ testimonies would indicate that it is not just a part of this process, but a fundamental part of it. Moreover, the sense of one’s past self as having become this historical Other, now lost and potentially recovered in the vinyl *objet a*, carries particular emotional fascination.

In addition to the scientific, philosophical, musicological and psychological accounts given above to explain the professed role of haptics in the love of vinyl, there is a long cultural history of the idea that touch is the most authentic of interactions with ‘reality’, and that this may be echoed in the discourse of the vinyl resurgence. Roger Smith sees this in ideas about touch and kinaesthesia (‘the conscious feeling of movement through muscular effort’) coming from science, philosophy and art during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writing that

there are significant ways in which modern western culture treats – and has treated – the tactile sense, broadly understood as a sense of activity, as the source of deep experience and knowledge ... when artists [of the late-Victorian and Edwardian world] turned against the aesthetic values of the academy and sought for what they believed was deeper, real, or natural authority for their work, they found in the sphere of touch and movement a pre-existing imagination about what was deeper, real, or natural, an imagination linked to the very conception of life itself.³⁴

These impulses run throughout the era’s Romanticism, realism and modernism, and were inherited by twentieth-century counterculture and the model of authenticity central to its aesthetics of folk and rock.

It is, however, difficult to say the same for Romanticism and modernism in art music over the same historical period, and therein lies one of the clearest points of departure between classical Romanticism or modernism and its later manifestation in rock. For all participants in rock and related countercultural genres – and especially now with the vinyl resurgence – touch and kinaesthesia (in movement and dance) are key attractions and even prerequisites. Art music, however, was considered not only to transcend matter but to become the highest of the

³¹ Mike Ness (punk musician), in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 102.

³² Reynolds, *Retromania*, p. 235.

³³ Sean Homer quoted in Winters, *Vinyl Records and Analog Culture*, p. 59.

³⁴ Roger Smith, ‘Kinaesthesia and Touching Reality’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014), pp. 3, 5, 27. See also Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

arts in doing so, as Mark Evan Bonds shows at length in *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*. Among the many thinkers surveyed, Bonds finds Schopenhauer indicatively observing of a Beethoven symphony that ‘all the human passions and emotions speak . . . , yet all, as it were, only in the abstract and without any particularization; it is their pure form without the material, like a pure spirit world without matter’.³⁵

By stark contrast, vinyl’s new apologists see it as having the closest possible relationship to the ‘music itself’, even becoming synonymous with it, now liberated not from matter but from the abstractions of digital code and returned to its rightful material, messy home. Godfroy tells Bickerdike that vinyl comprises the ‘music itself’ in its most complete form: ‘vinyl is the definitive audio document. It is a crafted moment of creative self-expression, shared between artist and audience’.³⁶ Note that the second sentence could easily have reproduced the traditional narrative of the best live performances. If the aesthetics of the vinyl resurgence have anything in common with art-musical modernity (whether Romantic, avant-garde or historically informed), it is that music can and must have a particular locus of authenticity; in this case however, it does not require a transcendental, immaterial ontology and an imaginary museum but a quantity of polyvinyl chloride and a set of shelves.

Do such assumed ontological differences explain the relative scarcity of classical and contemporary classical music amid the vinyl resurgence? Perhaps, but there are other factors. Sonic differences play a role: as Corbett and one of Bickerdike’s interviewees note, compression and distortion tend to suit popular musics better than traditionally recorded classical music, while noise inevitably intervenes in classical’s quieter and silent passages.³⁷ Nevertheless, vinyl has been popular as an audiophile medium for some classical listeners, catered to with high quality reissues by the likes of Speaker’s Corner and Clearaudio. Besides which, it needs hardly be said that composers and performers have frequently encountered and mingled with popular musics of many kinds, including their technologies. The messy informality and genre ecumenicism of many post-war avant-gardes is well embodied in vinyl reissues by labels such as Blume and Superior Viaduct, the latter recalling downtown New York City as it sees Tony Conrad, Steve Reich and Jon Gibson share a catalogue with avant-rockers like The Fall, Suicide and Liquid Liquid, and Glenn Branca sitting comfortably between them all. Newer music whose techniques or audiences straddle popular and classical genres is increasingly released on vinyl, including by composers such as Ellen Arkbro, Sarah Davachi, Kara-Lis Coverdale, Mica ‘Micachu’ Levi and Anna Meredith, and through labels such as Prah and Erased Tapes, who release Nils Frahm and Ólafur Arnalds. Even Deutsche Grammophon have entered this area, releasing Jóhann Jóhannsson, Max Richter and others on vinyl (along with vinyl reissues of some back-catalogue classics when they resumed vinyl production in 2015). In many cases these musicians use relatively continuous textures to focus on closely miked and/or electronically augmented acoustic instruments, relishing the noisiness and physicality of their

³⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819, 1844), trans. E.F.J. Payne and Mark Evan Bonds, in Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 291.

³⁶ Godfroy, in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 204.

³⁷ Corbett, *Vinyl Freak*, p. 62, Steve Hackett (guitarist and singer-songwriter), in Bickerdike, *Why Vinyl Matters*, p. 78.

mechanical action, all of which suits both rock's aesthetics of sound and authenticity as well as the sonic corollaries of vinyl. Contemporary classical music's showing in the vinyl resurgence has grown and looks set to continue to, especially in areas where genre distinctions blur. Haptics plays a part in this, too.

Despite some of its defenders' claims, vinyl need not be considered exclusively or supremely tactile among recorded media, though in the ways discussed above its tactility has been considered an especially rich, valuable and historically authentic example. CDs, compact cassettes, USB sticks and SD cards have also conveyed music as a discrete, tangible object, though the latter two can be difficult to store and survey. To whatever extent we might agree with or dispute assertions over the 'reality' and materiality of analogue as opposed to digital media, touch remains a crucial component of it.