1 Introduction

'Do you get more done when music is playing?'[1]

In 1970, the City of Helsinki decided to conduct an experiment at three of its premises aimed at studying the effects of using Muzak products. The experiment focused on employee satisfaction, self-perceived work performance, measured productivity, and customer impressions. The endeavour was inspired by a proposition from Finnestrad, the local Muzak franchisee. A project report (City of Helsinki 1970) was archived in the personal files of Mr Eero Vallila, the owner and chief executive of the company, and found decades later by background music researchers.

The music system was installed on the shop floor where employees worked in the city's central laundry department and the car repair shop of their building office. For assessment in customer service premises, the city chose its child welfare office. A survey was conducted charting the views of the employees and measuring the efficiency of their work. Interestingly, the question the survey asked regarding choosing an option other than Muzak offered only one alternative, the Finnish public radio music programme Sävelradio (see subsection 4.2).

From the point of view of Finnestrad, the results were disappointing. Contentedness was deemed 'fairly good' in the employee sample and 'good' in the child welfare customer sample. No increase in either efficiency or productivity was detected. The outcome was precisely opposite to the marketing message Muzak was attempting to convince potential clients of at the time: that any music could entertain people, but it took scientifically tested Muzak to make organisations and businesses churn out more profit and productivity. In the end, the report did not recommend making Muzak a part of the city employees' workdays; it did, however, recommend that a subscription to the Muzak system be procured for the customer service space of the child welfare offices.[2]

This episode touches on at least three points relevant to this Element. Firstly, the power of music – however ingeniously tailored – to bring about intended results is and always has been limited and subject to a multitude of variables. Secondly, the historical changes in music cultures have significantly affected the market trends for functional music products: the idea of entertaining child welfare customers with background music products using taxpayer money would probably sound alien in any decade other than the 1960s and 1970s.

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[1] City of Helsinki (1970), Appendix 3: question sheet.

[2] Documentation about acquiring the system for the child welfare premises has not survived but, in 1971, the city seems to have installed a Muzak system in at least one healthcare unit. Vallila made several subsequent attempts to get a contract with the city, including donating music systems to city administrative units for limited periods.

Thirdly, the prevailing music culture of the time invariably affects the discussion and circumstances surrounding background music: employees given one alternative to Muzak – Sävelradio – might reveal a preference for it in their responses, which they did. The result, however, says more about the music listening culture in Finland in 1970 than any universal boost in work capacity, atmosphere, or general productivity as a result of either alternative.

Background Music Cultures in Finnish Urban Life is inspired by these kinds of observations of the past and present cultural conditions of using functional music in everyday life. It is the first concise ethnomusicological, sensory ethnography-oriented, and fieldwork-based analysis of music in urban environments, drawing from our research project ACMESOCS: Auditory Cultures, Mediated Sounds and Constructed Spaces (2019–22). This Academy of Finland funded research takes auditory culture and the materiality of background music practices seriously and analyses them as part of sonic environments and their socio-spatial contingencies.[3] The project's three research strands scrutinised (1) the development of the commercial sonic environment and its implied human object, the listener-consumer, referring to the target group of the background music industry – at whom its message has been and is currently aimed; (2) economic, technological, legislative, organisational, and cultural factors transforming urban acoustic environments in the context of ubiquitous music, including novel products like the generative software used in creating branded musical ambience; and (3) experienced and reclaimed acoustic environments to understand people's experiences, perceptions, and actions in urban and commercial environments, especially regarding ubiquitous musics.

Researching urban auditory cultures, ACMESOCS focused on how these are experienced, articulated, and reclaimed. We are interested in shedding light on social, legal, economic, and technological factors that have an effect on the historical development of the background and foreground of the music industry, on the construction of contemporary sonic environments, and on the use of individual meaning-making in various public and commercial environments. The aim is to include a diversity of listening and experiencing and to give room to a range of approaches by introducing the added precision of crowdsourced and field materials.[4]

Although the relationship between music, place, and listening has been extensively studied (see e.g. Stockfelt 1994; Born 2013; Section 2 in this Element), interest in background music specifically has been somewhat limited.

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[3] This publication is funded by the Academy of Finland.

[4] The ACMESOCS field materials are referred to as follows: ACMEf = fieldwork notes; ACMEi = interviews; ACMEp = photos; ACMEs = surveys conducted by the project.

This Element analyses a combination of the agency of the groups that are designing and experiencing background music: producers, people working in environments filled with background music, and city dwellers, who are often cast in the role of consumers. This approach sheds light on the functionality of background music beyond more general notions of sales promotion and customer persuasion. Background music has also frequently been portrayed in research as a uniform phenomenon, or even as an identifiable musical genre. In our view, the state of play is rather a plurality of background music cultures: certain shared global marketing logics and functions with considerable differences in local emphasis.

Compared to the often sleek and smooth design of playlists, the experience of music among the urban din is often more rudimentary. Urban dwellers participate in and pass through living acoustic environments where they encounter lo-fi technology in playback systems: muffled and compressed music, barely audible between layers of hums, voices, and sounds. The most common situation in which one encounters background music is moving past loudspeakers in hallways and stores. This causes the music to be heard in dynamic glides, waves of intensifying and weakening sounds, momentary and random, presenting us with methodological questions: which parts of the 'music not being listened to' are actually audible to start with, and to whom – how is it relevant, and how can this relevance be studied? How can the diversity of the listeners and their listening abilities be considered as a relevant aspect with regard to the urban experience of music?

We explore background music as a central dimension of modern and postmodern urbanity. Music has a long history as a part of commerce, marketing, and consumption, as well as a fundamental part of urban culture. We propose that background music as a phenomenon is, by definition, tied to the figure of the *listener-consumer*, the modern urbanite who is, on one hand, a creation of the advertising industry and, on the other, an individual within a mediatised music culture who is able to *dishearken* (*borthöra*, Stockfelt 1994: 20), or pay no attention to music. Referencing the formulations of mediated urbanity and urban media studies (Tosoni & Ridell 2016), where urban space is seen as a networked and bodily context of media consumption, this Element brings forth the densely mediated and overlapping acoustic realities that are embedded in the urban fabric, woven into the very infrastructure and material conditions of urban space. Background music makes urban spaces recognisable, negotiable, and distinctive. Playing background music is a mediatised place-making process through which urbanity can be listened to.

Our point of departure is to study background music as culture. Studying music as culture may identify how societal values such as hierarchy or

individualism are reflected in musical conceptualisation, behaviour, and sound (Nettl 1983/2005: 217–18). Researching music as humanly organised sound in given circumstances refers to not only the end product but also process and activity. This includes the interactions between human beings, motivations behind their behaviours, and the significance they attach to them. These intellectual, physical, cultural, and social dynamics and processes generate musical products. Music is made perceptually, conceptually, and emotionally. This process, termed as *musicking*, refers to how music is not just made but also responded and assigned meaning to. (See Blacking 1973; Small 1998; Rice 2014: 5–6, 9.)

Tia DeNora's seminal *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), based on fieldwork carried out in the 1990s, provided a wide-ranging account of people and music in everyday life in Britain. In our Finnish research setting, we focus on one phenomenon within everyday musical experience: the use of background music. We go further in contextualising it in its 'unsolicited' form, holding on to the experiential approach while also including the structures of the contemporary digital background of the music industry and its spatial and cultural manifestations. As an enhancement of a culture-specific analysis of the Finnish case, this Element provides a methodological tool applicable to understanding 'background music in culture X'. This model will enable taking into account specific features of each local culture – for example, those related to music, sound, the service sector, urban architecture, public and commercial broadcasting, and the mediascape as a whole.

Contrary to popular media discourse that treats background music as one-dimensional or manipulative, this Element offers a broader understanding of music culture as an historical and spatiotemporally bound phenomenon for the non-expert in the field. Based on extensive ethnographic data gathered through interviews, surveys, and fieldwork (such as listening walks and participatory observation), and supported by archival research, it will also present a novel data-gathering method, suitable for collecting information on everyday experiential phenomena as ephemeral as background music. This approach, combining walking methods, mapping, sound diaries, crowdsourcing, and use of music recognition apps and instant messaging, can be applied to educational projects, for example. We tap into examples like the use of music during the Christmas season, in shopping malls or sex shops, and historical cases like background music in primary schools, and so on. The sections delve into the profession of the background music designer/producer as well as the working environment of the cashier and the restaurant patron, among others. Finland, with its particularities in urban and environmental structures, along with its economic and music industry history, is our research context. Despite its cultural focus, the methodology and theoretical considerations in this Element are applicable to other countries and contexts.

An essential part of the cultural study of background music is the examination of the materiality of sound – aspects such as the spaces and systems that reproduce sound and how they function. Technology plays an essential role in the quality of the sound of music and how that sound carries to different parts of a given space. Among the factors influencing the outcome are the type of loudspeaker system and its age, how the system is built, the number of speakers, and the extent of the infrastructure on which the system depends for its functionality (Wi-Fi, power grid, system design, installation, maintenance, and repair). Integrated sound systems with dozens of loudspeakers can be almost invisible and thus accentuate the idea of the control of the system as being remote and disconnected.

This Element helps in building the reader's awareness and skills that create 'functional music literacy' (cf. 'media literacy'). This means an understanding of, for example, the agencies, spatial factors, and cultural conventions at play in urban commercial spaces with music. Background music processes are viewed as music cultures, taking form from ideologies, institutions, infrastructures, and material objects. The background music industry caters to culturally diverse ears, and the circumstances in which it is consumed vary likewise. Due to the Finnish context and the ethnomusicological approach, the study is culture-sensitive and specific, providing a fresh perspective on a phenomenon generally understood as industry-led, behavioural, and global.

The structure of this Element follows the lines of background music production – 'from the factory to the consumer', so to speak. In this section, we map out the concept of background music along its contingencies and present some relevant scholarly discussion from recent years. A contextualising section follows, explaining how we understand the Finnish context of the study and how different cultural, societal, and infrastructural characteristics shape the culture of background music locally. This section demonstrates the historical formation (from the 1960s until today) of the *listener-consumer*, that is, the model audience member for sonic advertising, and also deals with the early years of the background music industry in Finland. In the third section, based on extensive interviews, we elaborate how companies providing background music services operate and how they see themselves as actors in the fields of music and advertising. Publicly funded and commercial radio stations will also be presented as providers of background music. The following section moves from the production of background music services to the commercial space and to the service sector, consisting of people listening to background music several hours a day. This section, based on a large survey, interviews, and fieldwork observations, examines how people work with 'music not chosen' and how they understand it as affecting their well-being. The fifth section focuses on the so-called end users of background music, the

urban dwellers, and their everyday encounters with it. A case analysis demonstrating a seasonal disruption (Christmas) in the everyday implementation of background music aims to develop a toolkit of ethnographic methods suitable for a dense urban environment. In the last section, we discuss some current changes in the field and present a methodological checklist for studying background music that we hope will inspire students and researchers interested in the urban, music, and auditory culture.

2 Mapping Background Music as a Phenomenon

Background music as a phenomenon is multifaceted, and there are various perspectives from which to view it. Working towards a definition for this research, we start from the following: by *background music*, we mean mediated music played non-stop in commercial and public spaces, supporting/ assisting/accompanying other activities of a target group/city dwellers, with a function related to commercial profitability or work productivity. It is also usually created for temporary enjoyment and selected by someone (at the 'factory') not expecting the listener (the 'consumer') to stay and focus on the music.

To elaborate further on this historically and locally changing use of music, some analytical questions focusing on its infrastructural, social, economic, and ideological aspects can be helpful. The entanglement of these diverse topics is outlined in what follows (see Figure 1).

Though not to be read as too hierarchical or definitive but rather as dismantling the phenomenon of background music to gain analytical insight, Figure 1 specifies seven approaches in the form of questions: Where is it played? What is the playback medium? Who is the music collated by? Who regulates it? For whom is it played and how is it perceived? And, finally, for what ends is it played? The questions mentioned here are related to the concept of agency in background music, which is crucial in any study of music or sound in an ethnomusicological or anthropological context. In this study, the concept of agency refers to individual and collective capacities for action in music-related settings (Karlsen 2019; Section 5). The diverse agencies are manifested sonically in specific contexts of time, place, and listener.

The city, a dense geographic concentration of people and things, can be understood as a form of music as well. The density of the soundscape (perceived as the increasing number of loudspeakers) has stirred up a critique of 'piped music', a discussion similar to the environmental concern of urban habitats in the 1960s: mechanised music and PA systems were discussed as a form of pollution and excess detrimental to a healthy environment. This discourse on
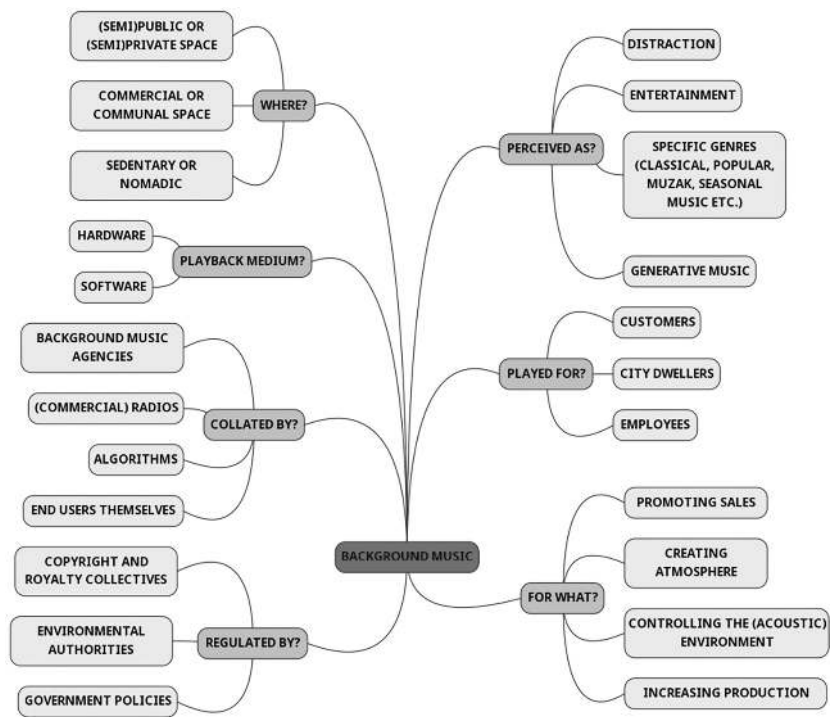
Figure 1 Contextual vivisection of the phenomenon of background music. Left: the nature of built space and the technology used for playback can be seen as infrastructural elements. Bottom left-hand corner: we understand collating and regulating as agency-related categories. Right: the perception of background music can be analysed on the level of experience. Bottom right-hand corner: categories related to the function and targeting of played music.

noise pollution is still very much present in discussions about the use of city space and urban community life. The uninterrupted sonic presence of background music is characteristic of media technologies that help in urban spatial organisation and navigation. Our 'factory-to-consumer' point of departure resonates with urban studies in its interest in the planning and designing of space and how it is re-made through practical use, incorporating communication technologies as necessary equipment (see Krajina & Stevenson 2020: 2).

Background music – like work uniforms – is a material practice that has emerged with modernity in the service industries. Whereas uniforms are more generally the result of an 'extreme rationalisation of appearance' (Tynan & Godson 2019: 2, 4), background music can be characterised as a sonic and spatial manifestation of a similar rational approach. Both are related to

a fundamental transformation of the experience of time and space in the everyday life of Western capitalist societies in the first half of the twentieth century. The work uniform enables clients to identify members of staff and also marks service employees as working in and belonging to the business premises. In the case of background music, the identifying and orienting effect is less clear, and the relationship of both the workers and the customers to the sound material can be ambiguous, sometimes subject to negotiation and reflection.

The different notions of background music itself are somewhat contradictory. Anahid Kassabian states that there is no commonly agreed name for music not chosen by the listener. 'Background music' is sometimes in the foreground; 'business music' refers to the economic role of the music; 'environmental music' refers to its role in forming contexts; and 'programmed music' refers to its production and distribution, leaving out its consumption. Kassabian prefers the concept of 'ubiquitous musics' being always present but beyond our control, 'slipping under our thresholds of consciousness' (Kassabian 1999/ 2006: 117). Affects such as bodily responses to background music or any other stimuli take place before conscious understanding. These responses pass into thoughts and feelings, leaving behind a residue that becomes 'the stuff of future affective responses' (Kassabian 2013: xiii–xv).

The term 'ubiquitous music' covers multiple listening experiences, starting from radio, which has historically provided a wide range of musics for ubiquitous listening. With the advent of digital listening technologies, people have unprecedented control over what they listen to in their everyday life. There is no link between specific listening approaches and specific music styles, nor can ubiquitous or background music be identified as a particular genre. 'Shopping, sleeping, and secretarial work take place in such radically different contexts and across such radically diverse demographic or identity groups that there is no reasonable way of labeling ubiquitous musics and genre in any ways in which the term is generally used' (Boschi et al. 2013: 6–7). Instead of a specific style of music, we need to concentrate on the *alleged function* of music, since almost any music genre can be selected for use as ubiquitous or background music. Apart from listening, we also study other ways of interacting with music, such as dancing and singing.

Ubiquitous musics can be defined by their relationships to listening and attention and by their description as 'musical events that take place alongside other activities' (Boschi et al. 2013: 6–7). The significance of the act of listening stands out, for example in the background music companies' attempts at catering to diverse ears. In 1981, a former Muzak representative in Finland wrote in an opinion piece that, unlike the content he described as 'distracting' background music, their content was 'not meant to be listened to but heard' (*Helsingin Sanomat* 1981). As an illustrative example of the shift in background