

Golden Ears and Wooden Ears – Knowledge and Learning Arenas of the Audiophile Community

Anita Thaler

IFZ / STS

This paper analyses informal learning arenas of audiophiles and asks which knowledge is relevant to be regarded as a member of the community.

Audiophiles listen to recorded music and pursue (by setting up their “perfect hi-fi-system”) a listening experience, which should be as close to a life-sound as possible. The aim is to hear the music as it was performed or intended by the artist (O’Neill 2004). Several studies confirmed that audiophiles are mostly well-educated men with incomes above average. In a survey from 1988 audiophiles reported to follow at least one of the community-typical periodicals like “Audio”, “Stereophile”, and “The Absolute Sound” (Perlman 2003).

In former studies, audiophiles have been characterised as either „golden ears“ or „meter readers“ (Perlman 2004), whereas in German-speaking countries the term “wooden ear” is also used. Whereas meter readers refer to physical evidence and rely on technical scales and testing methods to set up and improve a hi-fi system, golden ears rely mostly on their individual abilities and especially on their accurate ears (in opposition to “wooden ears”).

Whether the community will be distinguished in these two categories or others, it is apparent that audiophiles are not a homogenous group. However, “one thing that is valorised amongst all enthusiasts is knowledge” (Heward 2006, p. 25) and this is the main focus of this paper.

The previously described meter-readers stem often from a technological background (Perlman 2004) and therefore access knowledge previously gained in their formal technological/engineering/science education. The so-called golden ears are more often laypersons, who learn their relevant knowledge informally (about informal learning see for instance Marsick et al. 1999; Thaler 2010).

This paper will present insights from ethnographic research and the analysis of the magazine “Audio” to answer: where and how audiophiles can learn informally community-relevant knowledge, and which knowledge that is. For instance Jansson (2010) described this relevant knowledge as subcultural capital and explained how gendered notions of the hi-fi subculture lead to women’s exclusion from the audiophile subculture.

The results show that magazines, internet-forums, hi-fi-dealers and fairs can be seen as informal learning arenas for audiophile knowledge. Additionally audiophiles meet others (e.g. in groups of regulars or friends who meet in their living rooms) and discuss hi-fi components, sound qualities of recordings etc., this can be seen as informal peer training.

In all informal learning arenas two kinds of knowledge could be observed: the objective body of technological and physical hi-fi-knowledge and the more subjective knowledge expressed in a language to describe individual listening experiences and hi-fi-system performances.

References:

Heward, Kelly (2009). A technology of their own: Anti-mass sentiment and the high-end

- audio community. Thesis. Simon Fraser University. Download: <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/9760> [12.3.2013].
- Jansson, Sara (2010). "Listen to These Speakers": Swedish Hi-Fi Enthusiasts, Gender, and Listening. In: *Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, I@J* vol.1, no.2 (2010). Download: http://www.iaspmjournal.net/index.php/iaspm_journal/article/download/332/555 [20.1.2015].
- Marsick, Victoria J., Volpe, Marie & Watkins, Karen E. (1999). Theory and Practice of Informal Learning in the Knowledge Era. In: *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 1, 80-95.
- O'Neill, Brian (2004). Listening Spaces: Audiophiles, Technology and Domestic Music Listening. Download: <http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschmedcon/2/> [20.1.2015].
- Perlman, Marc (2003). Consuming audio: an introduction to Tweak Theory. Download: <http://www.tmgonline.nl/index.php/tmg/article/view/110> [20.1.2015].
- Perlman, Marc (2004). Golden Ears and Meter Readers. The Contest for Epistemic Authority in Audiophilia. In: *Social Studies of Science* October 2004, Vol. 34, No. 5, 783-807.
- Thaler, Anita (2010). Informal modes of technology learning and its gender implications. In: *Proceedings of the 9th Annual IAS-STC Conference on Critical Issues in Science and Technology Studies 2010*. Download: <http://www.ifz.tugraz.at/ias/IAS-STC/Publications/> [12.3.2013].