
METAPHORS IN ACTION

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WARM RECORDS, COLD CDs

RAYMOND GOZZI, JR.*

REMEMBER WHEN I first heard a CD back in the early 1980s. I did not like the sound. It seemed artificial, like a really good mechanical imitation of music. But I preferred the sound of my 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ records, which somehow seemed more lifelike.

At the time, friends assured me that "digital music sounds better." This was also a standard line in the media, used by the music industry to justify replacing records with compact discs. The old long-playing records were on their way out. The "record companies" were producing fewer and fewer records. CDs were taking up more shelf space in the stores. A huge transition was underway from records to CDs, which meant people had to purchase new sound equipment as well as replace their records with CDs.

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This transition was justified by the supposed increase in the quality of the recorded sound. After all, the new CDs were recorded digitally, their information stored in 1s and 0s like computers used. The old records were analog devices, using continuous grooves to store the musical information. Records relied on a vibrating needle to transmit the information, CDs used a space-age laser. With all this new technology, it seemed a foregone conclusion that the music would sound better.

But I still held out for the sound of the long-playing record. For many years I thought I was alone, or in a small minority, for not believing that CDs sounded better than records. Then, in the mid-1990s, I read some studies which showed me I was not alone.

In the studies, people were given “blindfold tests,” where the same music was played from records and from CDs, but they were not told which. About half the people preferred the music from records, about half preferred music from CDs. So I was not alone, I was not even in a minority. The old analog sound could stand up well in an ear-to-ear matchup.

I was interested to learn, a few years later, that audio engineers used a pair of metaphors to describe the difference between analog music (records and most tapes) and digital music (CDs, now also DVDs and some digital tapes).

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Analog music was “warm,” while digital music was “cold.” These metaphors worked for me. They put a finger on the differences I had felt for so many years. Analog music seems more lifelike, inviting, and “warm.” Digital music sounds more artificial, off-putting, and “cold.” Sound engineers are working on ways to “warm up” digital sound — increasing sampling rates, using different compression schemes, etc. I have my doubts that any of them can overcome the basic shortcoming of digital music, which I can summarize in a sentence.

Real music is analog, digital music is always going to be an inferior copy. Real sound waves are continuous, smooth analog waves which cover all intervals. Digital waves are discontinuous, step-like waves which always lose some of the analog information. (These digital waves from a CD are translated back into an analog sound wave from the speaker, but the resulting sound is impoverished.)

I must admit that some musical styles probably do sound better in digital formats. “Techno” music, “heavy metal,” “punk,” and a lot of the in-your-face rock styles of the ’80s and ’90s are doubtless well-suited to the impersonal digital sound. But the kinds of music I like to listen to, jazz, instrumental, vocals where people actually sing — these need a warmer, more personal analog sound.

I notice that some independent artists continue to put out records, in the belief that they sound better than CDs. However, the march of technological change has been relentless. It is harder and harder to find replacement needles, or reasonably priced turntables. I must confess I gave away my turntable and records a couple of years ago. I am holding on to my cassette tapes, but these clearly are being obsolesced by the “record industry” as well. We are going to get a digital future in music, whether it really sounds better or not.



