Audiophilia in the Age of Streaming: Preserving Aesthetics, Ritual, and Identity

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Abstract

Before the new millennium, the word "audiophile" evoked imagery of shrine-like stacks of componentry, shelves of vinyl or compact discs, and ritualistic actions towards the summoning of sound. Listening to music was often a communal experience, centered around systems in a shared space. But is that conception slowly disappearing? "Legacy" audiophiles are aging, and younger entrants to the world of hi-fi are eschewing the larger-scale hardware and spaces common in the past. The first part of this work seeks to find canonical definitions and discourses of audiophilia through a comprehensive literature review. The second part examines whether these definitions and discourses hold up in an age of portable playback and streaming services. In other words, are the users of these newer technologies still audiophiles? To answer these questions, we explore the personalization of cultural consumption, the relationship between identity and meaning, the creation and expression of communities, and other related concepts to offer a new definition of audiophilia.

Keywords: Audiophilia, Identity, Listening Cultures, Audio Technology

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Introduction − Canonical Definitions of Legacy Audiophilia

While a love of beautiful sound cannot be dated, a permissive definition of "legacy" audiophilia can include striving for the first audio quality improvements in phonograph technology at the beginning of the 20th century. The term "audiophile" itself was coined in the 1950s and used in niche circles, but for the purpose of understanding its commonly construed meanings, we will focus on the period from the 1970s to the early 2000s – the golden age of speaker-based audiophilia. Speaker shops were common then, the collection of physical media was part of cultural zeitgeists worldwide, and listening spaces allowed for the sharing of sound and the creation of audiophile communities.

While legacy audiophilia is still alive and well, many music listeners have turned towards the use of portable audio, including wireless earphones, small Bluetooth speakers, soundbars, smartphones, and streaming. On its face, the popularity of these new technologies might be considered a sacrifice of sound quality for convenience and portability, but are characteristics of legacy audiophilia still found in these more modern uses? To answer this, we must first understand what it meant to be an "audiophile" in that earlier era.

Through a literature review, five common themes around legacy audiophilia emerged. The first is the pursuit of quality in sound, sometimes bordering on the obsessive (Hales, 2017). Second, tweaking and modification is one way to pursue one's ideal sound (Castanheira, 2024; Hosokawa & Matsuoka, 2017; Perlman, 2014). Third is the consumption of or aspiration towards "halo" and high-end products (Baaske et al., 2024). Fourth is religious and ritualistic elements in the consumption of sound (Barry 2010; Dotto, 2019). Fifth is one's own sense of identity as an audiophile (Harris, 2015; Ng et al., 2016; O'Neill, 2004).

Appreciating Audio Today – Can Current Trends Be Considered Audiophilia?

The early-to mid-2000s signaled a shift in how listeners engaged with sound. CD sales reached a peak in 2000 and faced a precipitous decline in the ensuing years. While higher-end SACDs found an audience in audiophiles, particularly those interested in classical music, it was the beginning of the end (or at least a lull in popularity) for physical media, and speaker and record shops began to close their doors. With the decline of physical media came two shifts in music consumption, each arguably a step backward in terms of sound quality and engagement with the physical. The first was to digital music on MP3 players or other portable digital audio players (such as the iPod), with music often ripped from CDs or downloaded from pirate sites and online storefronts (iTunes, RealPlayer, etc.) or pirate sites. Many early MP3 players did not provide very much in the way of audio quality, and earphones in those days rarely provided high-quality sound. This period was very roughly from 2000 to 2010. The second shift was to streaming audio, where an internet connection was necessary and files were streamed in real time, usually from a central server. Rather than navigating through one's own personal library of digital music, one would navigate through near-limitless online offerings. In fact, the estimated revenue of music streaming providers rocketed from under a half-billion USD a year in 2010 to around 20 billion USD in 2023 (Statista, 2024). This period began around 2010 and has continued to the present. In the following section, we will look at changes to listeners' relationships with audio bought about by these two shifts and if any participants in those shifts can be considered audiophiles in the same sense as their speaker-wielding progenitors.

Pursuit of Quality in the Reproduction of Sound

While there has been little scholarly work that deals with the definition of an audiophile, a common conception is someone wishing for "sound approaching the neutral or 'transparent'" (Harmon, 2009). Hales (2017) states that "the aesthetic aim of high fidelity is to achieve maximum transparency - the degree to which the listening experience is qualitatively identical to hearing the live instrument." However, Hales also states that audiophilia can be a "broadly pluralist artistic endeavor that aims at an idealized generation of a musical event."

In other words, transparency is not a necessity. Given the large number of audiophiles today who listen to sub-optimal vinyl records or even cassettes, there must be something more than just accuracy. This research argues that audiophilia can be considered the meticulous pursuit of sound quality, with *quality* being a subjective ideal that is not constant. Some audiophiles aim for a certain sound profile, like having a "British" sound, and others prefer the warm analog tones of tube amplifiers and records. Of course, many audiophiles still follow the first definition outlined by Hales, aiming for the most accurate and transparent sound.

Part of this push by audiophiles for quality sound has been the selection of physical media, an integral part of legacy audiophile culture. Audiophiles traditionally preferred physical media for its sound quality. While a massive turntable for vinyl records is most closely aligned with the image of an audiophile, another example is the introduction of the SACD (Super Audio CD) format in the early 2000s, which, at least on paper, greatly improved on CDs in terms of bitrate and accuracy. Even cassettes were embraced by some audiophiles, who bought chrome or metal tapes and used very expensive precision decks to ensure high-quality recordings.

However, the use of technology for accurate sound is still found in modern audio consumption. Audiophiles have the choice of using high-bitrate or lossless streaming formats like MQA and FLAC instead of MP3 files. In addition, portable players have been marketed that focus on sound quality, with advertising materials targeted at audiophiles and providing information on bitrates, DAC chips, and noise reduction. While this was seen in previous decades as well, the linking of headphones, earphones, and portable players with audiophile enjoyment only reached more widespread recognition in the early 2000s, which will be explained in more detail in the section on audiophile identity.

In addition, sound quality can be examined through frequency response graphs and distortion measures of portable audio devices, particularly headphones and earphones. Affectionately called "squiggles," these graphs represent the sonic signatures of headphones and earphones. Given the closed nature of portable audio, they provide much more information on how an earphone or headphone would sound compared to the frequency response graphs of speakers, which are dependent on placement, wall location, and many other factors. The uptake of this sort of data analysis by modern portable audio listeners, as seen in the plethora and popularity of online frequency response comparison tools, could be considered an objectivist pursuit of sound quality.

Tweaking, Modification, and DIY

Legacy audiophiles have endless options when it comes to tweaking, modification, and DIY. Tweaking, or making small, non-substantial changes to a system or listening setup in pursuit of better sound, can be accomplished by moving speakers, changing cables or components,

changing sources, or even fiddling with equalization settings. Modifications are also easy with the simplicity of amplifier and speaker technology – capacitor replacements, installing aftermarket drivers, and port drilling are all par for the course. DIY is popular as well, with speaker kits and solder-it-yourself amplifiers finding a small but dedicated base.

It may seem that the relatively closed systems of portable audio, at least hardware-wise, preclude modification and tweaking by audiophiles. But, in practice, that has not been the case. It could be argued that audiophile modification began to reach larger audiences with the introduction of the iPod. With millions of users having the same equipment and able to communicate in online spaces, modification became easier, and cottage industries also sprang up to meet demand. Perhaps the most well-known early example of modification is the "iMod" from Red Wine Audio, for which part of the iPod's internal amplification circuitry is bypassed, leaving an ostensibly cleaner line-out source. Other examples of physical modification include adding sticky tac around headphone driver enclosures or covering an earphone bass port with tape and poking a hole in the tape with a needle.

In terms of tweaking, some audiophile-focused IEMs (in-ear monitors) even have changeable components from the factory, such as swappable filters that control frequency response, different types of eartips (not just sizes, but selectable materials and shapes), and removable cables that use MMCX or proprietary connectors.

Figure 1: Miniaturization

In addition, tweaking on the "software" side has become more popular, particularly with equalization. While in the past, equalization was accomplished with a large, rack-mounted box with physical sliding tabs to control frequency response at particular ranges, now it can all be done through software on a portable amplifier the size of a lighter, or even on a smartphone app or through the internal circuitry of wireless earphones/headphones.

For DIY, handmade speakers and amplifiers have long been a mainstay of legacy audiophilia, due to their relative simplicity and ease of construction. While handmade headphones or earphones are far less popular, handmade portable amplifiers became vogue in audiophile circles starting in the early 2000s, particularly with "CMoy" amps made out of off-the-shelf components and assembled inside an "Altoids" tin, a small metal case originally for mint candies.

"Halo" and High-end Products

According to Shaw (1993), "an audiophile committed to putting together the best stereo system possible can easily spend over $100,000. The components will typically come from manufacturers whose names are completely unfamiliar to those who buy their stereos at local discount stores…"

One example of a "halo" brand with its roots in legacy audiophilia is Wilson Audio, founded in the 1970s and gaining popularity through the 80s and 90s. While audiophiles in the US were the majority of consumers, it was popular worldwide as well. In Japan, an entry-level Wilson Audio system could run around 3 million yen in the 90s, when an ordinary high-end system ran at less than one tenth of that cost.

In contrast, halo and high-end consumer-oriented headphones were few and far between during the golden age of audiophilia, with one outlier being the Sennheiser Orpheus HE-90 ($12,000 USD in 1996). They have been gaining popularity in the past two decades. The modern equivalent of the HE-90, the Sennheiser Orpheus HE-1, is over $50,000 and currently the most expensive headphone system in the world (not including statement headphones made with precious gemstones or large amounts of precious metals), a cost jump beyond that of inflation. But even though high-end portable audio has continued to flourish, it does not come close to the sky-high prices of legacy audiophile products: the Wilson Audio Chronosonic speaker is over $800,000 USD as of 2024.

For portable audio, the turning point towards high-end audiophilia could be considered the rise of the "kilobuck" headphone in the early 2010s. More and more equipment producers realized that audiophiles would be willing to pay a premium for exclusive and high-end products, beyond what traditionally professional-oriented equipment offered. Kilobuck headphones were released by titans such as Audio-Technica, Sony, AKG, Yamaha, and Sennheiser.

However, there has also been a rise in budget-oriented offerings targeted at audiophiles, particularly hi-fi brands from China such as Moondrop, HiFiMan, and Edifier for headphones/earphones, and SMSL and Topping for components. Del Collano (2022) writes in Future Audiophile: "If you've got a Power Ball winner budget, that is Kool and The Gang with us. For the rest of us who want to enjoy the hell out of our music without having to sell a kidney, or those of us who want to help others get involved in the hobby, the concept of Chi-Fi is simply wonderful . . . Often, with the value and performance of some of these products, you might just be blown away."

This points to an additional bifurcation: are listeners with less discretionary income for audio products and buying budget equipment, but still maintaining many traditional audiophile characteristics, still considered audiophiles, or more casual listeners? This is one case where modern audiophilia veers away from the legacy characteristics. While a $40 dollar headphone in 1985, adjusted for inflation, would not even be close to the fidelity required for audiophile examination, a $40 dollar headphone today can often trade blows with high-end products.

Religious/Ritualistic Elements

Perlman (2004) states that "'audiophiles' construct their own universe of meaning around their equipment; they cultivate a distinctive vocabulary and set of attitudes … they also

engage in controversy to defend themselves against knowledge-claims that would delegitimize their universe of meaning." For some audiophiles, personal experience trumps scientific methodologies or the collection of supposedly "objective" data. There has also been friction among audiophiles between evidence-based, "objective" audiophilia and personal-experience-based, "subjective" audiophilia, with the former focusing on analog reproduction and the latter digital, though there is a surprising amount of overlap. Dotto (2020) states that some critics have created an "evangelical lexicon" around the consumption of analog audio.

In addition, as seen in Fig.1, the ritual of using complex equipment, talisman-like accessories, and physical media can hearken to rites at an altar or shrine, a space to bask in the transcendental or spiritual.
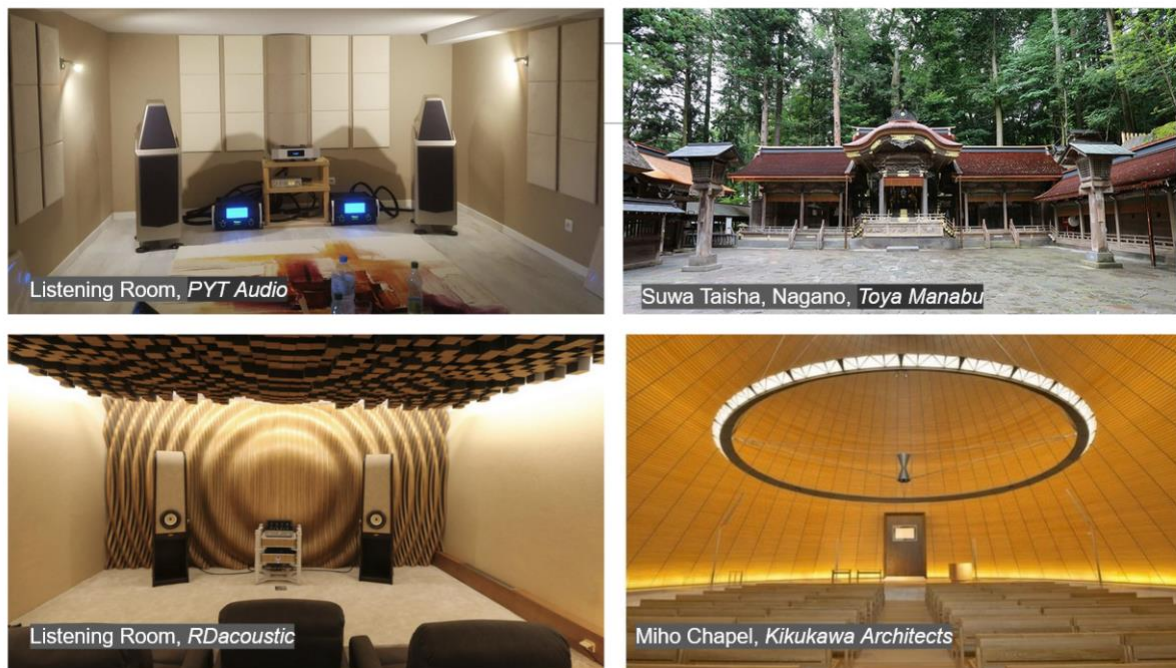

Figure 2: Spaces of Worship

Modern audio has not eschewed this. Portable digital audio players have made a resurgence in the audiophile world, with brands like Astell&Kern creating obelisk-like offerings, and headphone listening desks can have stacks of audio components that mirror the hi-fi listening rooms of yore, just on a smaller scale, as seen in Fig. 3 below.

Figure 3: Altars of Worship

Even hand-carried portable audio equipment can be carried in stacks (for example, a digital player, a DAC, and an amp held together by bands) has similar shrine-like properties, something like the *mikoshi* but with less of an emphasis on the impermanence of transit.

Identity

While the details depend on the country. Audiophile-oriented magazines such as Stereophile (founded in 1962, with monthly publication beginning in the 1980s) and The Absolute Sound (founded in 1973) were definers of audiophile identities. Alongside that was an often community-oriented experience where audiophiles would hold listening parties or just casually listen to others' systems. Audio stores were an important fixture. "Manufacturers … sell their wares at high-end audio stores, many of which have the air of specialized boutiques and serve as gathering places for a community's audiophiles" (Shaw, 1994).

Portable audio and streaming, however, only began to gain traction in the internet age, and online forums like HeadWize and HeadFi spearheaded the conception of portable audio as an audiophile endeavor, and supplanted earlier stores and magazines. Even though there were higher-quality headphones available before, they had not quite spread to audiophile circles. Tyll Hertsens (2023), writer for InnerFidelity and ostensibly one of the earliest proponents of portable audiophilia, stated, "By the time the headphone hobby started with Chu Moy and the Headwize forum in 1998, the HD 580 was well established, and HD 600 was just becoming available. They were the de-facto standard to which all other headphones were measured...but because they pre-dated the hobby, they were never the flavor of the month, they never received a love of their own." Such audio forums are still active today, but now the audiophile spaces have grown to YouTube, and "influencer" reviewers, such as Crinacle (who originally became well-known through a personal headphone measurement and review site) command large audiences. Perhaps most importantly, these groups refer to themselves as audiophiles, and adopt much of the lexicon used in legacy audiophilia.

Interestingly, in a return to roots, we have seen a worldwide blossoming of stores dedicated to the experience of listening to headphones, earphones, and portable audio, though they are still few in number. Examples include E-Earphone in Tokyo (est. 2011), the Headphone Bar in Vancouver (est. 2010), Headfoneshop in Toronto (est. 2011), Audio46 in New York (est. 2013), and Audio Sanctuary in London (est. 2009). Portable audio get-togethers and events are increasing in popularity as well. The largest and most well-known, such as CanJam, began in the mid-2000s. (The predecessor to CanJam, the National Head-Fi Meet, began in 2006, and the first CanJam was held in 2008.)

Conclusion

Characteristics of legacy audiophilia are still applicable in an age of portable audio and streaming, though the smaller scales and relative youth of the hobby preclude it from the same extent of cultural impact. However, the lower barriers to entry for high-sound-quality, from costs to accessibility of equipment and software, mean that that modern audiophilia is available to those lacking space or on a budget as well. In addition, communities of portable audio aficionados consider themselves audiophiles and interact to discuss and pursue quality sound in its many forms. Rather than not consider users of modern, streamlined technologies as audiophiles, this paper considers extending one's conception of what it means to be an audiophile.

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