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Pop music these days: it all sounds the same, survey reveals

Pop music is too loud and melodies have become more similar, according to a study of songs from the past 50 years conducted by Spanish scientists

Sean Michaels

guardian.co.uk, Friday 27 July 2012 15:32 BST

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A sea of homogeneity? ... revellers at the park stage at Glastonbury 2011. Photograph: Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images

Pop music is too loud and it all sounds the same. That's the conclusion of scientists at the Spanish National Research Council, who have published a new report on songs released between 1955 and 2010, showing the "diversity of ... note combinations ... has consistently diminished in the last 50 years".

Measuring the Evolution of Contemporary Western Popular Music, by Joan Serrà, Álvaro Corral, Marián Bogueña, Martín Haro and Josep Ll Arcos, appears in the journal [Scientific Reports](#). The researchers used a dataset of 464,411 music recordings to analyse what has changed – and what has stayed the same – over the past half-century of song. "Many of [music's] patterns and metrics have been consistently stable for [this] period," they wrote. "However, we prove important changes or trends related to the restriction of pitch transitions, the homogenisation of the timbral palette, and the growing loudness levels."

When researchers write about "pitch transitions", they mean the way notes are used – the variety of intervals, and the difference between one melody and another. Melodies are becoming more and more similar, [Serra explained to Reuters](#). "We obtained numerical indicators that the diversity of transitions between note combinations – roughly speaking chords plus melodies – has consistently diminished in the last 50 years."

Not only are the melodies of songs more similar than they used to be, the timbral palette employed – the sounds of the instruments – has also grown narrower. A trumpet's sound, its "timbre", is very different to the sound of an electric guitar or electric piano. But now, apparently, songs are relying on a much smaller range of timbres than in the past. When so many instruments are synthesised, perhaps, or rely on digital processing, the trumpet begins to lose its trumpet-ness.

Finally, the research team found [scientific evidence for the so-called "loudness war"](#). Owing to mastering and compression techniques, new songs are literally louder than old songs. Or, as the scientists put it: "The empiric median of the loudness values x grows from -22 dBFS to -13

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dBFS, with a least squares linear regression yielding a slope of 0.13 dB/year ($p < 0.01$, t-test)." Despite this fact, the Spanish team also found that songs' "absolute dynamic variability has been conserved" over the years. In other words, the overall dynamic range of recordings – the distance between a song's quietest and loudest moments – has remained more or less the same.

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 **MarshallStack**
27 July 2012 3:39PM

All modern music is pants.
Thank God we've still got Quo.

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 **SDGrange**
27 July 2012 3:55PM

Why bother trying to create fresh hits for the pop princesses of the future? Just use the X Factor/generic talent show method and recreate fan favourites.
I can't wait to hear this years X Factor winner cover the 2009 Christmas no 1

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 **RustyTheDuck**
27 July 2012 3:58PM

I always thought that was the point of pop music, to be safe, familiar, accessible unchallenging, catchy but ultimately forgettable. If you want more out of your music, try digging a bit deeper :)

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 **joeygrimlock**
27 July 2012 3:59PM

I just came on here to say Phil Collins is a legend.

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 **bassmonkey1980**
27 July 2012 4:00PM

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Response to [SDGrange](#), 27 July 2012 3:55PM

A cover of 'Rage Against the Machine'? Treason sir!

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Drumbo

27 July 2012 4:01PM

I don't have anything against hip-hop, but would things be better if they removed hip-hop from the study? Because it is all rather similar, even the good stuff.

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jonotheintrepid

27 July 2012 4:02PM

What was the criteria by which they chose the songs they evaluated? If they just analysed top 10 singles then of course it's all homogenised garbage. But if they actually went beyond the factory produced x-factor trash one might hear on the morning drive show on Capital FM or whatever, they would probably find that the range of different melodic and rhythmic variation available on record to the average consumer today is lightyears ahead of what it was 50 years ago.

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Werthersoriginal

27 July 2012 4:02PM

Damn my dad was right!

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jonotheintrepid

27 July 2012 4:03PM

Response to [Drumbo](#), 27 July 2012 4:01PM

are you suggesting that Aesop Rock is "rather similar" to Dizzee Rascal? Or do you just not know that much about hip-hop?

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Optimistic96

27 July 2012 4:04PM

I hope this means modern music as in Katy Perry and whatnot, rather than ALL MODERN MUSIC IN EXISTENCE EVER.

Because that'd be complete bullshit.

If it does mean the shite pop music listened to by teenage girls who like Twilight etc. etc., then I agree.

And what's the Park Stage at Glastonbury 2011 got to do with it all?

[Recommend? \(6\)](#)

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okilydokily

27 July 2012 4:04PM

Nonsense - two of the greatest UK pop acts of recent years, Steps and S Club 7, sound as different as...

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badbeard

27 July 2012 4:04PM

Listening to music when I was a teenager was exciting. Without putting much effort in I was able to discover vastly different sounds. I had so few points of reference that lots of what I heard was so unlike what I'd heard before. I genuinely thought that the Beta Band were the most exciting thing on the planet in 1998.

If I'd heard all the stuff I'm familiar with now back in 1998 I wouldn't have drawn that conclusion. I'd have seen them through the prism of what came before.

This study is looking through that prism.

Nowadays I still get excited by new sounds, but I am ready to acknowledge that they sound like garbled rubbish in comparison to the Beatles or Django Reinhardt. Or the Beta Band.

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cortazar

27 July 2012 4:05PM

This is because the charts are increasingly controlled by people like Simon Cowell who, in the words of Goldie, knows "f**k all about music". There's still loads of amazing music out there. As anyone who's got more than a passing interest in music

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knows.

Then again, they did use "a dataset of 464,411 music recordings". To be honest they sound like the world's most boring people.



stodulky

27 July 2012 4:08PM

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Anyone who thinks pop music is getting worse clearly hasn't heard Ali Campbell's reggae cover of He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother.

Sparkling stuff right there.



stevieray1

27 July 2012 4:10PM

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Response to [MarshallStack](#), 27 July 2012 3:39PM

All modern "commercial music" is pants, there are still wonderful musicians out there who are very succesful both aesthetically and financially, although not in the quick flash way of pop stars. Derek Trucks, Joe Bonamassa, Jim Campilongo, should all sound good to the ears of any guitar player



Nicoise

27 July 2012 4:11PM

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Response to [jonotheintrepid](#), 27 July 2012 4:02PM

The researchers used a dataset of 464,411 music recordings to analyse what has changed...



POPRAT

27 July 2012 4:13PM

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I blame Dave Cameron



jantomrukthefirst

27 July 2012 4:15PM

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Pop music is too loud and melodies have become more similar, according to a study of songs from the past 50 years conducted by Spanish scientists

Didn't know my Dad was a Spanish scientist



firstblood

27 July 2012 4:15PM

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Response to [cortazar](#), 27 July 2012 4:05PM

Goldie? Really? do you mean simon cowell or simon groom?



fracturedpelvis

27 July 2012 4:15PM

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big music festivals are now the domain of non-music fans who merely want to be seen at a festival and tell their mates about the experience.

grazia's 2 page "how to dress at a festival": time to get out your bo-ho flower child gear!



OtherMeans

27 July 2012 4:17PM

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Have a look at the "Amen Break" sometime...



willonone

27 July 2012 4:17PM

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Any talentless twat with a voice sync program and a few hundred quid's worth of software can make the average tune in the charts. Because there is no care or craft going into the music, the value of music diminishes and every year we inch closer the dystopian nightmare Simon Cowell planned every day since he released Power Rangers upon us.



elscollonsdelgos
27 July 2012 4:18PM

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Pop music is too loud and it all sounds the same.

My Mum could have told you that. Why didn't they give the research grant straight to her?



healey
27 July 2012 4:18PM

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Response to [joeygrimlock](#), 27 July 2012 3:59PM

I just came on here to say Phil Collins is a legend.

Agreed!



Thomomatic
27 July 2012 4:19PM

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Response to [POPRAT](#), 27 July 2012 4:13PM

I thought it was the previous governments fault, the eurocrisis and the weather's fault!



healey
27 July 2012 4:21PM

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The influence of hip hop has shifted the emphasis to bass and beats.



MonkeyOverlord
27 July 2012 4:23PM

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I find this quite interesting, because I've definitely noticed in recent years that pop music seems to borrow passages and chord progressions from other very recent chart tracks. It's noticeable to the point where I suspect it's actually a concerted effort by pop songwriters to 'hook' listeners with familiar sounds.

Listen to Katy Perry's 'Last Friday Night' and then Jessie J's 'Domino'. Almost identical backing tracks, including the little breakdown in the middle. Then there's that Professor Green track with Emilie Sande which sounds very, very similar to that track by Tinie Tempah and some beardy fellow. I struggle to remember more (I only really hear this sort of music in the gym or my girlfriend's car), but I'm always spotting these similarities.

I'd be very interested to hear from someone who works in the industry as to whether this is a widely-known sales technique, so to speak, or just a by-product of lazy composers.

But, as one or two commenters have pointed out, the depth of independent music has grown exponentially over the last few decades. Whenever I read a 'is rock dead?' article I can't help but wonder whether the writer actually listens to music.



royroy
27 July 2012 4:23PM

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I'm surprised the industry hasn't tapped into the market for music that hasn't been mastered for maximum loudness. Some people have decent hi fi equipment, and aren't listening to the music on a radio or mp3 player... so why not sell the standard modern mastered tracks, but also a separate edition with the true dynamic range intact? Sure there'd be more mastering costs upfront, but a higher inventory.



healey
27 July 2012 4:23PM

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Response to [healey](#), 27 July 2012 4:21PM

..and before that rock and roll, blues and jazz did the same.



elscollonsdelgos
27 July 2012 4:24PM

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Things are recorded louder than before. When I listen to music when running I listen to lots of rock, old and new. The newer the recording, the louder it is. DRums and base also have a lot more whack than in the past. The drummers of some rock bands from the the early 70s sound as if they were playing on bisuit tins.



royroy
27 July 2012 4:25PM

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Response to [jonotheintrepid](#), 27 July 2012 4:02PM

Prime example of reading the first paragraph then skipping straight to the comment box?



Henryplant
27 July 2012 4:25PM

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I'm currently working on covers of songs that haven't yet been recorded. Is that a second?



icurahuman2
27 July 2012 4:26PM

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"Pop music" is literally "popular music" and the styles of what are deemed popular are wide a varied, even if that music can sound very alike within its genre. I could never understand why ABBA was so popular, when to me it sounded like elevator music, until I noted the fan base - grannies and grand-kids add big time to a wide demographic. If there's been any major change over the decades since Herman's Hermits I think the biggest change, to my ear at least, has been the loss of the drums and bass variation. A lot of popular music, across several genres, now use synthetic drum and bass stables, which leads to a boring bass tempo that rarely changes - this means even live performances (on the rare occasions they aren't dubbed) sound like the studio recording, which is boring. Live bands used to do all sorts of improvisations depending on how and on what the drummer/bass player was whacked, you won't see too many drum machines having a sneaky puff, or a double Jack Daniels before a gig these days.



elscollonsdelgos
27 July 2012 4:29PM

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Response to [icurahuman2](#), 27 July 2012 4:26PM

I could never understand why ABBA was so popular, when to me it sounded like elevator music, until I noted the fan base.

The study concluded that ABBA's fan base was much broader in countries with a high concentration of lifts.



bitthick
27 July 2012 4:29PM

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Response to [stodulky](#), 27 July 2012 4:08PM

Anyone who thinks pop music is getting worse clearly hasn't heard Ali Campbell's reggae cover of He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother.

Just to clarify that one:

Anyone who thinks pop music is getting worse *could illustrate their point with* Ali Campbell's **reggae cover of the 40-odd-year-old** He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother.

Sparkling old stuff right there.



AttleeOrwell
27 July 2012 4:31PM

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Has the world changed or have I changed?



timetorememberagain
27 July 2012 4:33PM

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Interesting article. Thanks.



oliversmith456
27 July 2012 4:36PM

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Music doesn't get worse, you get older.



pookachu
27 July 2012 4:38PM

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Response to [elcollonsdelgos](#), 27 July 2012 4:24PM

Things are recorded louder than before. When I listen to music when running I listen to lots of rock, old and new. The newer the recording, the louder it is. DRums and base also have a lot more whack than in the past. The drummers of some rock bands from the the early 70s sound as if they were playing on bisuit tins.

Yeah, that is spot on. I always thought Mr. Moon sounded a bit lacking on my Dad's old vinyl. Charlie Watts always sounded paper thin, and wasn't even a very good musician.

Oh, and worst of the bunch, John Bloody Bonham. It's like he's playing ghost drums in his own private reverie! Now there's a bloke who couldn't get a good sound onto tape.



[profp](#)

27 July 2012 4:41PM

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In another, related study, academics have discovered that music of the classical period sounds pretty much the same. Despite great claims that fans make for newer, hipper composers like Beethoven, the study found that composers tended to rely on the same forms and styles as their predecessors. One professor commented, 'I know we have equal tuning and a clear division of orchestral forces, but if I have to hear another slight variation on the standard sonata form, I'm gonna go postal.'

A third study, into folk music in Britain, uncovered an equal paucity of fresh material. 'Fundamentally, it's embarrassingly simplistic,' a concerned ethnomusicologist commented. 'New songs are minute variations of older songs, and many singers can't seem to grasp even the basics of rhythm. They're very suspicious of anything that smacks of innovation and change. We gave them a Roland keyboard, to see what happened; they muttered something about the Devil, and then they hit it with a stick.'



[grabsplatter](#)

27 July 2012 4:45PM

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In other words, the overall dynamic range of recordings – the distance between a song's quietest and loudest moments – has remained more or less the same.

That's not hard when most songs end with a fade out. At what point do you consider the song to have finished? Try "A Day in The Life" for example. That fade out lasts about a minute, if not more. Towards the end, the hum of the studio equipment is as loud as the piano(s).



[elcollonsdelgos](#)

27 July 2012 4:49PM

[Recommend? \(0\)](#)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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Response to [pookachu](#), 27 July 2012 4:38PM

Oh, and worst of the bunch, John Bloody Bonham. It's like he's playing ghost drums in his own private reverie! Now there's a bloke who couldn't get a good sound onto tape.

Bloody brilliant drummer but on 70s recordings (haven't heard the remixes) drums (and base) aren't given the same weight as they are on a recording today. Compare any Led Zep album to, say, the latest Foo Fighters (not talking of comparative merits of music) - just the % levels given to drum and bass.



[grabsplatter](#)

27 July 2012 4:52PM

[Recommend? \(2\)](#)

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Response to [pookachu](#), 27 July 2012 4:38PM

pookachu

27 July 2012 4:38PM

Oh, and worst of the bunch, John Bloody Bonham. It's like he's playing ghost drums in his own private reverie! Now there's a bloke who couldn't get a good sound onto tape.

Agreed. As his drum sound got better (slightly) he stopped being the powerhouse he'd been. The Knebworth gig just shows him as sounding bored. The Danmark TV gig, on the other hand...



[Werthersoriginal](#)

27 July 2012 5:03PM

[Recommend? \(2\)](#)

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Response to [grabsplatter](#), 27 July 2012 4:52PM

I think the cheeky chap was joking ...



edaj
27 July 2012 5:07PM

This article is amusing to me. That is all.

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InTheWonderlandZoo
27 July 2012 5:10PM

Nostalgia is just not what it used to be!

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chriscrunch
27 July 2012 5:17PM

Great news! Now when I tell people in their twenties that their music is utter rubbish, instead of sounding like an old fart I can back it up with legitimate scientific research. How awesome is that?

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retrorik
27 July 2012 5:18PM

Can't argue with that.

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gomuk
27 July 2012 5:18PM

Music just seemed to have more highpoints in my youth. There was an awful lot of dross as well, Tina bloody Charles and David Soul come to mind, as Johnnie Walker baptised it, 'monotonous disco fodder' but there were bands like Camel, the Ramones, Jethro Tull, The Sex Pistols, a vast array of others that had energy, vitality and above all originality.

I just don't find that nowadays. Its the call of the music industry that says you're only a 'success' if you sell so many records. Musical success is about legacy as well as how many platinum discs you get. Last night on Radio 6 the discussion was about the best instrumental of all time, the most popular being 'Sylvia' by Focus. Who, other than me remembers seeing Focus? I actually worked for them once and yet they left two or three amazing pieces of music for us to enjoy and marvel at. Can I name one piece from the 2012's that I would think will still be around in thirty years time? Nope.

[Recommend? \(5\)](#)

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hapusiawn
27 July 2012 5:28PM

Don't think Sir Cliff would comment - but he could drive a double decker at the same time!

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