

Imogen Heap as Musical Cyborg: Renegotiations of Power, Gender and Sound

Alexa Woloshyn

Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, Canada

alexa.woloshyn@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Imogen Heap, British electronica artist, has had a successful solo and collaborative career since her 1998 release of I Megaphone. She became a widespread name in 2004 after the song 'Let Go' from her collaborative album with Guy Sigsworth, Details, was used in the film Garden State. Following this success, Heap returned to solo work and released Speak for Yourself in 2005. Through an analysis of Heap's musical development from her earliest musical experiences to her latest solo endeavors, this paper demonstrates Heap's renegotiations of power, gender and sound allowed by the reconfigurations of institutional and commercial structures, which were enabled by the developments of recording technology. I assert that the affordability, accessibility and capabilities of electronic technology, and computer technology in particular, are essentials to Heap's career and music.

1 Introduction

Imogen Heap became a widespread name in popular music after the use of her group Frou Frou's song 'Let Go' in the movie *Garden State* (2004). Following Frou Frou's album with a self-produced solo album called *Speak for Yourself*, Heap continues to make a name for herself as an electronica artist-producer. She is a musical cyborg as she incorporates "technological extensions to [her] sound producing capabilities and kinetic expressions of the human body." (Gay 1998. p. 84) It is through her cyborg identity that she renegotiates traditional notions of power, gender and sound. I demonstrate these renegotiations through biographical details, analysis of published interviews with Heap, and close readings of her music. At the end of the paper, I will frame Heap's current status as electronica artist-producer within the reconfigurations of institutional and commercial structures enabled by developments in recording technology.

2 Early Musical Life

Heap's earliest music training was in classical piano and theory, but from a young age she was fascinated with other

instruments, including cello, clarinet (Retka), and a "hilarious keyboard with boss-nova presets" (Gilbey 2005). Her first significant opportunity to experiment with electronic music technology was at the private boarding school she attended as a young teenager. Heap clashed with her music teacher, who punished her by sending her alone to a small room. Left in the room with an Atari computer, with Mac Classic 2 and Notator, and the large manual, Heap began to experiment and gained an interest in building her own studio (Gilbey 2005). She formalized her training in production at the BRIT school of Performing Arts & Technology in Croyden, Surrey, from 1992 until 1995.

In 1998, Heap released her first solo album *I Megaphone* with Almo Sounds. This album shows little trace of her early interests and skills in electronic technology, excepting a few tracks that resemble Björk ('Oh Me, Oh My'). Her style is more reminiscent of Kate Bush and Tori Amos ('Candlelight'). But through the initiation from Guy Sigsworth (producer, composer, musician for Björk and Madonna) to collaborate as Frou Frou, Heap began to interact more intentionally with electronic technology. The result was *Details*, released in 2002.

3 Frou Frou

According to the liner notes, Sigsworth and Heap both played guitar, piano, drums, synthesizer, samplers; wrote the music; and arranged and produced the album. This project was a huge stepping-stone on Heap's path to artistic autonomy, as she began to participate more thoroughly in all aspects of album making. Unfortunately, the album was not initially received with the popularity Heap and Sigsworth had hoped for. They both moved on to other projects. But after Zach Braff included 'Let Go' during the emotional climax of his film *Garden State*, as well as including it as the only background song in the movie teaser, Frou Frou and Imogen Heap were suddenly famous. Subsequently, many songs off the album were used in movies and on television.¹

¹ 'Let Go': *The Holiday* (2006), 'So You Think You Can Dance' (2006), *Garden State* (2004); 'It's Good to Be in Love': 'Birds of Prey' (2002);

Despite the claims in the liner notes, Heap's cyborg identity on *Details* is not overt. Generally it seems that Heap's voice is merely placed on top of the electronic sounds and loops with minimal technological manipulation beyond the customary reverb and echo. Frou Frou's videos maintain the gendered association of technology, namely, that the man plays with technology, while the woman is the pretty voice on top.

For example, the video for 'Must Be Dreaming' visually highlights Heap through close-ups of her on a bed and shots of her running down a hallway. Guy Sigsworth does not even make an appearance until half way through the first chorus. When he does appear, he is in the background playing the keyboard, handling the technology; this image is strikingly similar to the promotional photographs of the group. As quickly as he appears, Sigsworth disappears from view. He makes occasional appearances in the choruses, once again behind the keyboard. At one point, Sigsworth sits quietly in the shadows, a single silent being: *l'Éminence grise*. According to this video, Imogen is not a musical cyborg, but rather the pretty voice and face. Sigsworth, on the other hand, is the cyborg with the technological power.

Similarly, the video for 'Breathe In' has a conspicuous lack of Sigsworth appearances, with him making only four brief appearances in the video. He stands and looks at the camera twice at the beginning and twice at the end. Because of the many other characters that are given close-ups, Sigsworth is practically unidentifiable, unless one already knows what he looks like. In the video for their third single, 'It's Good to Be in Love', Sigsworth is completely absent. One might suggest that this only serves to affirm Heap's importance as a musician, but I believe that, on the contrary, the videos contradict the type of work she does and wants to be known for. Heap explains,

"It's not Guy's fault, but with Frou Frou, everyone assumed the man did all the production and engineering, mixing and programming and that the girl, me, just sang. And I have to say that really irritated me. We did everything together. I'd been programming on Macs since I was twelve and that was more of a love for me than singing ever was" (Purevolume).

The minimal appearance of Sigsworth in the videos does not seem to diminish his power, but rather increase it. It is almost as if he is the puppet master running the show behind the scenes, in the shadows, dictating Heap's movements. The videos only serve to maintain the misinterpretation of Heap's role in the group. This misinterpretation surely contributed to her desire to forge a solo project, in every sense, and finally convince the public and critics of her technological skills.

But her work in Frou Frou was not without its benefits. Through Heap's work with Sigsworth, her sound became more codified and distinct within the broad genre of

electronica. For instance, she incorporates sounds from "real" instruments, such as piano, cello, harp and mbira, and layered vocals, and downtempo beats, "while electronic noises swoop and swirl with a refreshingly understated gracefulness" (Lerner).

Heap acknowledges Sigsworth influence in several interviews:

"My solo work has definitely changed as a result of working with Guy..." (Auralgasm 2006).

"I loved working with Guy. I'd learnt so much from him.... Now I was bursting with ideas and just wanted to get my hands really dirty!" (Purevolume).

The success of Frou Frou, however belated, also afforded Heap the option to work independently of recording labels (Retka). She spent a year working in her home studio on *Speak for Yourself*, which was released in 2005; since then her solo work has been used in popular films and on television shows.²

4 The Cyborg Returns

Heap embodies a cyborg identity through the blend of her body and voice with technology. Cyborg discourses about Heap are ubiquitous. A 2006 *New York Times* review describes the single 'Hide and Seek' as "the ghostly pièce de résistance," a song which suggests "a kind of lovesick cyborg alienation, an almost disembodied, distinctly modern malaise" (Sinagra 2006). An online blog for the *Denver Post* states that Heap "manipulates the sound by using digitizers, computers, and echo machines to create a type of cyborg music: it feels organic even though it's been computerized" (Rodriguez 2007). Even fans have picked up on the cyborg trope in their personal reviews of *Speak for Yourself*. For example, one fan webpage asserts, "Imogen's voice burns through the cyborg tones of a double-tracked vocoder, creating a strange angelic warmth out of the mechanical modulations" (Christensen 2005).

The blend between Heap and technology is heard most basically in the technological modifications to her voice, such as double tracking in 'The Walk' and 'The Moment I Said It', heavy reverb in 'Just for Now', a vocoder effect in 'Closing In', distortion in 'Daylight Robbery', and echo in 'The Moment I Said It'.

The most shocking song on the album, in terms of style and production, is the third release of the album, 'Hide and Seek'. The song was played in 'The O.C.' Season Two finale and gained enormous popularity after that. Heap revealed through interviews that a breakdown of technology actually led to the creation of this song. Her new computer

¹ 'Must Be Dreaming': 'Six Feet Under' (2003); 'Breathe In': 'Life as We Know It' (2004), 'Six Feet Under' (2002), 'Smallville' (2002).

² 'Hide and Seek': 'So You Think You Can Dance' (2008), 'CSI Miami' (2007), 'Smith' (2006), *The Last Kiss* (2006), 'The O.C.' (2005); 'The Moment I Said It': 'Ghost Whisperer' (2008), 'So You Think You Can Dance' (2007), 'Criminal Minds' (2007), 'The Black Donnellys' (2006); 'Speeding Cars': 'Suburban Girl' (2007), 'The O.C.' (20006); 'Just for Now': *The Holiday* (2007); 'Goodnight and Go': 'The O.C.' (2004); 'I Am In Love With You': 'Lipstick Jungle' (2008).

was malfunctioning due to a faulty power supply. This halted her work, but she decided not to leave her studio without any work done. So she picked up her harmonizer, plugged it into her keyboard via MIDI and recorded it on her eight-track mini-disc recorder. As she sang into the microphone and played notes on the keyboard, the harmonizer took that vocal input and shifted it to the other pitches depressed on the keyboard. Heap (2005) describes the process:

“The only sound you can hear on Hide and Seek is my voice. There’s no keyboard noise. All those harmonies are a result of what notes I play on the keyboard, which then tells the harmonizer which notes to make my voice appear to sing. I can choose the amount of effect (harmonies) to show through. I used about 50/50. So you can hear unaffected natural voice too. The first thing I sang (luckily set to record) were the words “where are we? What the hell is going on?” I carried on playing and singing, reacting to the chord inversions the harmonizer was throwing at me (it was set to four-note polyphony, four notes at a time, but using most or all fingers on the keyboard, the box is forced to choose which notes to use out of a chord) and before my very ears a song had emerged out of nowhere.”

This song clearly manifests Heap as cyborg. The sound is only achieved through an integration of the voice with the technology.

Heap’s cyborg identity can also be observed in her live performances. For some electronica musicians, only the recorded album is of consequence. But for Heap, creating a live concert is very important:

“It took me a long time before it [*Speak for Yourself*] came out to figure out how I was going to [translate the recorded album into a live show]. I don’t want to just press play but at the same time I don’t just want to play the piano. I want the audience who hasn’t heard it to realize that there’s much more to it than just piano but at the same time, I’m not just some little girl who sings to backing tracks” (Alderman 2005).

Heap typically has about fourteen “instruments” on stage with her at any given time (Snider 2006), including a sampler, a Mac laptop, a large mbira, keytar, and a specially made cyborg piano that can hook up to MIDI and trigger sounds (Barcode 2005). In the video of a live to air performance on Indie 103.1, Heap is surrounded by her keyboard, sampler, laptop, and mixing board. Her live version of ‘Just for Now’, with its series of overlapping loops, demonstrates a seamless blend between her natural voice and body (hand claps, finger snaps) with technological capabilities. This is Heap the cyborg, aural and visual.

As I have previously stated, technology maintains gender associations. But Heap establishes herself as a beautiful, statuesque woman capable of working with technology on her own. Heap explained in an interview that when people compliment the record and ask who made it, she relishes in the opportunity to say “Me” (Retka).

In addition to renegotiating sound and gender through her musical output, Heap also renegotiates power in her relationship with technology. In several interviews about *Speak for Yourself*, Heap describes the writing process for the album, explaining that the majority of the songs were not written before heading to the studio.

“Before I made the record I had no vision of what I wanted to do and I had no songs before I went in. I spent the last year just coming up with sounds and it became what it became. There was no grand plan” (Auralgasm 2006).

The album came about as an experiment with her voice and skills as an instrumentalist in combination with the seemingly endless options afforded by the technology.

“I’m building it as I go along. Like a painting. It just builds and builds, and then there’s no kind of moment where you...; you don’t rub white paint over a painting and go, right, let’s do that final one. You do it as you go along and then you end up with the final product” (Retka).

As I mentioned earlier in the discussion of ‘Hide and Seek’, even the breakdown of technology had the power to influence the creation of some of the songs on this album. ‘The Moment I Said It’ was written when her computer broke down, forcing her to work with non-electronic instruments and technology: in this case, a piano. Furthermore, when her equipment would break down, Heap would listen to other people’s music, often gaining inspiration for her own music and lyrics (Barcode). Technology had influence over the creative process, both in its presence and absence.

As I previously highlighted, the renegotiated power relationship is also apparent in the production details of ‘Hide and Seek’. Though it was originally Heap the human and the mind that gave the harmonizer the power to choose only four notes, it became a combined effort of the cyborg: Heap’s voice generates the sound that the harmonizer transfers to different pitches; Heap’s hands depress the keys of her choice on the keyboard; and the harmonizer then chooses the final outcome of pitches.

5 In the Artist-Producer Lineage

As a parallel to this discussion of Heap’s musical career, I will now discuss her status as artist-producer as an embedment of historical reconfigurations of institutional and commercial structures enabled by developments in recording technology. In the early years, creative interaction with the technology was restricted to institutional studios, due to its cumbersome and costly nature (Chadabe 1997). As tape technology became cheaper, and multi-track technology offered the artist creative options beyond mere transduction, more professional and amateur musicians built home studios. During this time, the producer was growing in importance, with many producers becoming as famous as

the artists they worked with.³ The technology afforded greater innovation, thereby granting the producer an increased creative status. With the development of digital technology, home studios became commercially viable and useable spaces, producing music equal to that produced in professional studios (Théberge 1997). Also by the 1990s, personal computers became ubiquitous, principally due to their affordability (Rubey 1999). Now computer users have access to trial downloads and packages such as iLife (which comes with all new Apple computers) that allow amateur composers and producers the opportunity to make their own music. Heap recognizes her dependency on the state of technology for her ability to create this latest album.

“Technology has been a big factor. I couldn’t have made my first record or this record ten years ago with the technology that existed. I just feel very liberated. I can make any single sound on the planet; I can just download a sound. I can make any record I want. There’s no limitations now” (Auralgasm 2006).

Technology not only allowed for the creation of Heap’s music, but also for the dissemination of it. Heap’s promotion of *Speak for Yourself* took place largely on the Internet. Her first three singles ‘Hide and Seek’, ‘Goodnight and Go’, and ‘Headlock’ were digital releases on iTunes. As well, MySpace proved invaluable for the dissemination of her music, and the establishment of her fan base.

With increased accessibility and affordability comes the opportunity for women to participate in recording. Women were generally restricted socially and economically from the production side of the recording industry until the home studio and personal computers. Heap believes that what she has done as an artist and as a woman is part of a larger trend facilitated by an increased access to recording and production technology. Heap offers her forecast for the future:

“And I think we’ll see a lot of young ladies in the future, because in the past it was quite difficult for a girl to get into a studio, to be a tea girl or anything, to help around the studio. And that won’t be a problem anymore because you can employ yourself to work in your bedroom!” (Gilbey 2005).

The limitation for creatively using music technology will no longer be associated with gender, but rather finances.

6 Conclusion

Heap grew up with increased accessibility to ever developing technology. Thus, she was able to forge her way in electronica as an artist and producer. By tracing her musical career, one can observe Imogen Heap, the musical cyborg, who was able to renegotiate power, gender and sound.

References

- Alderman, Melody [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. 2005. *An Interview with Imogen Heap*. Retrieved from http://www.puresongwriters.com/interview1_imogenheap1.htm
- Auralgasm [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. 2006, 18 January. *Imogen Heap: An Interview*. Retrieved from <http://www.auralgasm.com/Features/Imogen/default.aspx>
- Barcode [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. 2005. *Imogen Heap Interview*. Retrieved from http://www.barcodezine.com/Imogen_Heap_Interview.htm
- Chadabe, Joel. 1997. *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Christensen, Jared. 2005, 24 October. Loving: Speak for Yourself, Imogen Heap. Message posted to <http://www.jaredigital.com/>
- Gay, Jr., Leslie C. 1998. Acting Up, Talking Tech: New York Rock Musicians and Their Metaphors of Technology. *Ethnomusicology*, 42(1), 81-98.
- Gilbey, Sam [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. 2005. *Pixel Surgeon Interview: Imogen Heap*. Retrieved from <http://www.pixelurgeon.com/interviews/interview.php?id=200>
- Heap, Imogen. 2005, 18 June. Leepin’ Lizards. Message posted to <http://www.imogenheap.co.uk>
- Lerner, Will. Imogen Heap [Review of *I Megaphone* and *Speak for Yourself*]. *Rhapsody*. Retrieved from <http://www.rhapsody.com/imogenheap/more.html>
- Purevolume [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. *Imogen Heap – Frou Frou*. Retrieved from <http://www.purevolume.com/imogenheapfroufrou>
- Retka, Megan [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. *Imogen Heap: Interview*. Retrieved from http://www.imogenheap.com/media/press/08.05_londonnet_interview.html
- Rodriguez, Cindy. 2007, 11 February. Grammys: My Pick for Best New Artist. Message posted to <http://blogs.denverpost.com/>
- Rubey, Thomas C. 1999. At Issue: Profile of computer owners in the 1990s [Electronic version]. *Monthly Labor Review*, 122(4), 41-42.
- Sinagra, Laura. 2006, 13 January. With Her Synthesizer, She Mesmerizes [Review of *Speak for Yourself*]. Retrieved from *New York Times* Web site: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/13/arts/music/13imog.html?ex=1176782400&en=524be8dcf9048dcb&ei=50701>
- Snider, Charles [Interviewer] & Heap, Imogen [Interviewee]. 2006, 8 November. *Charles Snider Show*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTYd3khhcuw>; video no longer available.
- Théberge, Paul. 1997. *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.

Discography

- Frou Frou. 2002. *Details*. Universal Island Records.
- Heap, Imogen. 1998. *I Megaphone*. Almo Sounds.
- Heap, Imogen. 2005. *Speak for Yourself*. Megaphonic Records.

³ George Martin, Phil Spector, for example.