



The Ritual of Listening

On the mindfulness we still devote to sounds

The availability of music in today's world is as fascinating as it is unsettling. A single tap on the screen, a fraction of a second, and we have every track ever recorded queued up, ready to vanish just as quickly as it appeared. This availability, whilst convenient, has proved costly. We have paid for it with our attention. More and more often, music is becoming background noise. Something that plays unconsciously whilst we're doing something else. It is no longer so often something to which we devote our full attention, from the first to the last second.



In 1956, Dieter Rams and Hans Gugelot designed the SK4 turntable for Braun, which, immediately after its launch, was maliciously dubbed 'Snow White's coffin' by critics.

The name stuck, even though the designers' intention was anything but mournful. Instead of concealing the mechanism beneath an impenetrable casing, as had been the practice for decades, they covered it with a transparent Plexiglas lid. The platter, tonearm, stylus everything was visible, on display for the owner to see, as if the designers were saying: what you hear is also worth seeing. It was the moment when music-playing equipment ceased to be a device tucked away in a corner of the living room and became an object that one could look at for just as long as one listened to it.



Today's wireless speakers have gone in exactly the opposite direction. Small, matt, designed to blend into a shelf, not draw attention to themselves, not give away that anything is playing inside at all. This is also a subtle indication of how little we value the very act of listening today, given that even the object that makes it possible is meant to be inconspicuous.

In Japan, a completely different tradition has existed for almost a hundred years. Jazu kissa, or jazz cafés, appeared in Tokyo in the late 1920s, when imported records and a decent gramophone were an unattainable luxury for the average music lover. One could, however, sit in such a place, order a coffee and, for the duration of a single record, do literally nothing else but listen. In silence, face to face with huge speakers that nobody had at home.

Conversation was actually frowned upon there. The music wasn't just an accompaniment to the gathering. It was the gathering itself.



That same instinct is beginning to resurface today, and not just in Japan. In 2022, for the first time since 1987, more vinyl records were sold in the United States than CDs. It's not just nostalgia. It's a craving for something that streaming has never been able to offer: an object that you have to take out of its sleeve, place on the turntable, lower the needle onto, and which, in return, gives you exactly as much attention as you give it.

A playlist played with a single click asks nothing of us. A record asks for our presence. It asks us to get up after twenty minutes and flip it over, to choose what we want to hear today, rather than letting an algorithm choose for us. It is precisely this minor inconvenience – the need to participate, rather than merely passively receive – that turns it into a ritual, rather than mere consumption.

We designed the Urme cabinet with the same sense of tension in mind that has characterised well-designed audio equipment ever since the Braun SK4. It lies somewhere between concealment and display. Enclosed, it does not reveal too much. Two marble fronts held together by a rough-hewn piece of stone serving as a handle, set on tall, slender walnut legs. When opened, it reveals the entire

ritual at once: a turntable on a pull-out marble shelf, an amplifier just below it, compartments for records waiting to be chosen, a headphone drawer joined with a dovetail joint, and space for a small wine cooler and glasses, should the evening run late. It is a piece of furniture that does not hide the ritual of listening away in another room. It places it at the centre of the room we happen to be in.

An object that must be operated by hand teaches us something that no 'play' button will ever teach: that attention is something you give, not something you get for free.

