Muzak redivivus? Streaming subscription audio

Jon Jermey[*]

Streaming subscription audio is replacing the legal and illegal download of music tracks and other audio material as a means for internet users to select and play the audio of their choice. Huge collections of music tracks are stored on servers, and users pay a monthly or annual fee for access to these. Subscribers can "queue" large numbers of tracks for playback and create their own "mixes" of performers. In addition to desktop and laptop PCs, streaming internet audio is also becoming available for an increasing number of mobile devices. For users with a large broadband allowance and a fast connection, it is currently the most economical and legal way to hear a vast range of recorded material.

THE FALL AND RISE OF MUZAK

In 1934 the Muzak Holdings company[1] was established in the US to pipe soothing recorded music via cables into offices, department stores and other public places in many US cities. Seventy-eight years later, having staved off bankruptcy in 2009, Muzak Holdings is still with us, though its delivery methods have changed to embrace new technologies, and it now offers its clients a much broader range of "channels". Small wonder, then, that internet entrepreneurs have decided to take a leaf from its book and offer their clients what essentially amounts to the same service (though primped, polished and jazzed-up for the web) – an endless stream of recorded music, matched to your specifications and delivered on demand.

INTERNET RADIO

The more immediate roots of streaming audio lie in the internet radio movement. There are currently tens of thousands of internet "radio" stations, accessible via the web, which broadcast not through the airwaves but over internet cables and connections. Some provide just one "channel" of music, while others like SomaFM[2] offer more than a dozen. Despite regular skirmishes with recording industry bodies over royalty fees and the potential for copyright infringement, internet radio has become a large industry. Internet radio stations are typically free for the user to access. Some are supported by advertising, others by donations, while public broadcasters, like the BBC in Britain and the ABC in Australia, typically maintain internet radio channels as adjuncts to their free-to-air broadcast activities.

STREAMING SUBSCRIPTION AUDIO

The user of internet radio can choose from a vast range of channels, offering a huge variety of performers and types of music from baroque to heavy metal. From here it is a relatively small step to allowing users to select, in advance, the exact tracks they want to hear. This is the domain of streaming subscription audio. Originally offered almost as an afterthought by providers selling downloadable music tracks, the subscription audio model has grown to a level of size and sophistication which challenges the ownership model. Now there are many companies offering similar facilities, so prices are going down and the level of service – and the number of tracks available – has risen steadily over time. Audio streaming is the recording industry's latest and best response to the threat of music piracy. Though relatively new in Australia, it is becoming big business in the US.

The basic model is simple: a provider acquires the necessary licences to offer a vast number of high-quality music tracks to its clients on a streaming basis, in return for a monthly or yearly fee:

---

[1] "Muzak Holdings", *Wikipedia*, http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzak_Holdings; http://www.muzak.com.

[2] "SomaFM: Listener Supported, Commercial Free Internet Radio", http://www.somafm.com.

subscribers are permitted to play any track but not to retain the track on their system, so that when the subscription ends, so does their legal access to the music. Subscribers can search the provider's database for music or performers, and select tracks they want to hear. These are "queued" on the server and sent to the subscriber's PC, usually via a web browser. Subscribers can play any track as often as they want to hear it, exactly as if they owned the music. Their choices are saved when they go offline, and they can log in from any other browser and access their music queue from there, though only one user can be logged in to a particular account at any time. Some providers extend the same functionality to mobile devices like mobile phones and Android tablets.

Because the service on offer is essentially the same from each provider, competition is mainly on price, the number of tracks available, and the range of mobile devices supported. Below I have described three of the streaming subscription audio services currently available in Australia. All of them have free trial subscription periods available, so you can sample their features before you commit yourself.

JB Hi-Fi – Cheap and cheerful

The JB Hi-Fi company has recently opened a music streaming service[3] for both PCs and mobile devices. Subscription rates are among the lowest available, at A$25 for three months or A$80 for 12 months. Users can obtain a month's trial subscription via a mobile phone number. Streaming is purely web-based, so it should work on any operating system that supports a standard web browser.

According to *APC Magazine*,[4] the service has licensed 10 million tracks, although not all of those may yet be available. In addition to the ordinary track queuing facility, users can collect tracks into playlists (called "mixes") which they can store and recall later. Users can also choose to make their playlists available for other subscribers to view and play. In addition to text-based searching for titles or performers, users can opt to explore new music by browsing through genres or by examining the most popular choices. There is a small amount of information on most performers, but no links to more detailed material. Navigation paths through the system are not always obvious. Searching was sometimes a little slow, and it often took a minute or so to find and display my track list after I logged on to the site.

Where JB Hi-Fi falls down in comparison with other systems is in its limited number of tracks. Despite its impressive claims, I found that searching for more obscure artists turned up fewer results than with other providers. This is a deficiency that may be repaired in time, but if your musical tastes lie outside the mainstream, you may be better off paying a little more for a more comprehensive service.

Zune.net

The Microsoft Zune is a portable MP3 playing device which was intended to compete with the Apple iPod. For various reasons, including some clumsy design decisions, it never managed to do so, but Microsoft, with its customary persistence, has continued to support and promote the device and is now using it as the basis for a music distribution system. Subscribers to Zune.net[5] in the US get access to digital tracks they can play as streaming audio on their PCs and download to their mobile devices, including the Zune and the Xbox gaming console. The music files are protected by digital rights management (DRM) and stop playing if the subscription expires. Zune has a 14-day free trial service but this requires a credit card number. If you do not cancel after the trial period, you move automatically to a monthly charge of US$12. You can also purchase an annual subscription for US$120.

Although Microsoft does not make this clear, it appears that territorial marketing restrictions prevent Zune.net subscribers in Australia from downloading most of their tracks for synchronisation

---

[3] "JBHi-Fi NOW Beta", https://www.now.jbhifi.com.au/#/music/Home/Choose.

[4] Dockrill P, "JB Hi-Fi NOW Beta Serves up Free Music Streaming for a Month", *APC Magazine* (14 December 2011), http://www.apcmag.com/jb-hi-fi-now-beta-serves-up-free-music-streaming-for-a-month.htm.

[5] "Zune – Music", http://www.social.zune.net/music.

with mobile devices. This also appears to affect the functionality of the downloadable Zune application. An alternate web-based delivery system works well under Windows 7, however, offering an additional pop-up window which runs separately to the web browser. Linux and Apple Mac users with Zune.net accounts should be able to access their music in this way.

Zune.net's screens are in black on white and vaguely reminiscent of Apple's displays, although rather more cluttered. You can search the music collection without signing up, and get a good idea of whether the collection is going to satisfy you. I was pleased to find Zune has a reasonable collection of radio comedy classics and spoken word performances in addition to music. The Zune site also offers streaming movies and podcasts.

Sony Music Unlimited

The Sony Music Unlimited site[6] offers a 30-day free trial period to users who supply credit card details, which then segues into their Premium deal at $12.95 per month. A Basic option is also available for $4.99 per month. The main difference seems to be that Premium users can record their choices in playlists or a "Library", while Basic users have to re-select the music they want to hear each time they log in. Both subscription types come with a "Sync" application that can combine your streaming tracks with music already on your computer, giving you one control point for all media, though in practice this may exclude tracks from other sources such as iTunes.

Music Unlimited operates through a web browser and appears to function equally well under Linux or Windows systems. It should also operate under Safari for Apple Mac users. Searching seems to be a little faster than for the other systems discussed here, but it still takes a few seconds for new tracks to be located and loaded. The Sony system also supports playlists and downloaded files (up to a limit of 1,000) for some mobile devices.

I found the Sony site easier to use and understand than the Microsoft site, and it supported some useful features like drag-and-drop to move files into playlists. It had an excellent selection of music. The Sony site in the US also supports online music purchases, although this is apparently not yet available in Australia. Frustratingly, however, neither Music Unlimited nor Zune.net appear to offer any option for shuffling the tracks after you queue them – something JB Hi-Fi provides as a matter of course.

Other services

The services described above all work (or *should* work) on a PC, but there are also several applications available in Australia which stream music directly to a mobile device – typically a 3G or 4G mobile phone. These include the Samsung Music Hub[7] for Samsung devices, BBM Music[8] specifically for Blackberries, and JB Hi-Fi is currently developing its own mobile service.

Conclusion

The market for streaming audio is growing rapidly, so by the time this article appears there will probably be other services available for both PCs and mobiles. These may include an Australian version of Grooveshark,[9] currently the largest US-based streaming music service; a service from Australian telco Telstra using American company MOG; and the largest international service, Spotify, which launched an Australian service in May 2012. But right now, in the Australian PC market, JB Hi-Fi is the provider to beat, though if it introduced a shuffle option, the greater choice of tracks would also make Sony Music Unlimited a contender.

---

[6] "Music Unlimited", https://www.music.sonyentertainmentnetwork.com.

[7] "Samsung Music Hub – Samsung Apps", http://www.samsung.com/au/mobile/featured-applications/music-hub.html.

[8] "BlackBerry – BBM Music – Download BBM Music – BBM Music US – Messenger", http://www.us.blackberry.com/apps-software/bbm-music.

[9] "Grooveshark – Listen to Free Music Online – Internet Radio – Free MP3 Streaming", http://www.grooveshark.com.