7-2014

Beats (Review)

Mandi Goodsett

Cleveland State University, a.goodsett@csuohio.edu

E-Resources Reviews

BEATS MUSIC,
http://www.beatsmusic.com

For the past decade, the music industry has been attempting to provide listeners with legal, convenient ways to access music, competing with sites like Napster and its successors. In an attempt to pull consumers out of the illegal music free-for-all and into a fee-based streaming service, the music industry has fueled a sudden explosion of new mobile and desktop music streaming applications to satisfy the needs of digital-music consumers affordably and conveniently.

Moving from streaming radio services like Pandora, the new on-demand music streaming services like Spotify, Rdio, Google Play All Access, and Rhapsody offer listeners a higher level of control and greater ability to curate a listening experience than ever before. On-demand music streaming services differ from radio streaming in several ways: they accommodate user preferences, give the user opportunities to control his or her listening experiences (instead of being forced to listen to whatever is in the queue for a particular radio station), and support offline playback so music can be retrieved even without Internet access. These access models—in which listeners access large quantities of music stored on separate servers instead of purchasing and owning the music—still only make up a small percentage of the music industry's revenue. In 2011, it made up nine percent of revenue for music in the U.S. and increased to fifteen percent in 2012 with a strong possibility of an increase in that percentage in the coming years (Pham 2014).[1] While the state of music consumption is still in flux, the rise of on-demand music streaming services demonstrates a significant shift in the way music-lovers experience and access music.

WHAT IS BEATS MUSIC?

Beats Music is an on-demand streaming music service developed and led by Interscope/Geffen/A&M chairman Jimmy Iovine; co-founder of Beats Electronics Dr. Dre; CEO Ian Rogers; and Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. The company demonstrated a serious interest in joining the many contenders for most popular on-demand streaming service when it purchased MOG

Music in 2012, later ending that service and using some of its technology in the creation of Beats Music.[2]

Providing many of the same features and content of other on-demand music streaming services, Beats Music stands out by focusing on providing the listener with the perfect music for any experience, mood, or activity—all personalized to the user's tastes. Unlike other streaming music services, in Beats Music, recommended music is not chosen through algorithms fed to an Internet robot; suggestions and playlists are curated by real people. The founders of Beats and its many curators represent some very well-renowned musicians (co-founder Iovine runs the label that is home to Eminem, U2, 50 Cent, and Lady Gaga, and the chief creative officer is a member of Nine Inch Nails), and they present Beats Music as an approach to a music streaming service that is by and for serious music-lovers and musicians. The service is meant to be somewhat akin to visiting a record store and getting recommendations from an expert there who both knows your taste and can suggest something new you might not have thought of.[3] Instead of being overwhelmed by millions of choices, users are given suggestions that allow them to jump right in and begin expanding their musical horizons.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND SUPPORT

Like most of the other on-demand music streaming services being offered, Beats charges $9.99 per month for its services (or $119.88 per year), although it allows users a seven-day trial before purchasing. However, unlike Spotify and Rdio, Beats Music does not offer a free, less-robust version of its services supported by advertising. Those who are unable to pay or who are willing to endure the occasional advertisement would be better off with a different service.

Beats Music does offer a unique deal for AT&T users: Subscribers who sign up for a family bundle get a 90-day trial of Beats, after which the cost is $14.99 per month for up to five users and ten devices. This situation benefits both users, who can save money by splitting the cost of service among several people, and AT&T, who can draw more customers to their data plans, which cost extra fees. However, those without AT&T service cannot take advantage of this deal, and music libraries would also most likely be unable to benefit from the arrangement.

The content coverage of Beats Music is very similar to that of other large, on-demand services like Spotify and Rdio; all these services claim to offer over 20 million songs, and while it would be impossible to compare the exact collections offered through each, the overlap is likely considerable. Beats Music does differ in its radio channel offerings: While some streaming services provide the ability to listen to a radio station for specific genres, sports, or comedy, Beats does not offer any kind of radio service. As a radio

service would allow listeners to expand their musical palates, something Beats Music seems to value, the absence of a radio station seems to be a detriment to Beats Music's mission.

The first release of Beats on Android had a lot of bugs, which have by and large been resolved, though some of those bugs still remain, especially in the Web application of the service. While these issues can be frustrating—such as when initial attempts to play are delayed up to five minutes or more on the Web app—they are not surprising to find in such a new product; hopefully, these bugs will be completely worked out in the coming months. Beats does offer a support function that allows users to browse support documents, ask the Beats user community questions, make suggestions for improvement of the service, or submit a question for more help online or via phone. The search function of the support service is still buggy, but the community comments are helpful for identifying and resolving issues quickly if a resolution is possible.

FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS

Because so many elements of Beats Music are essentially the same as what other on-demand music streaming services offer, the choice between services comes down to the specific features of Beats Music. The layout of the main page in the mobile app consists of four main sections: Just for You, The Sentence, Highlights, and Find It. Just For You is a collection of playlists and albums recommended for the user by curators based on the user's listening habits and "likes," and is updated a few times a day. Highlights are playlists and albums that have been specially chosen by the curators to be highlighted. Playlists are often created by well-known artists and celebrities, such as Usher, quarterback Peyton Manning, Vampire Weekend, and many others, which may be a strong draw to some listeners.[4] In the classical music realm, Naxos Records offers a number of playlists presenting a unique perspective on music from the classical genre, such as "Sampled: Classical Music in Hip Hop, vol. 1," and for jazz listeners, Downbeat contributes several playlists as well. The Sentence is a fun "Mad Libs"–type service that allows listeners to find music based on their mood and environment, such as "I'm out and about and feel like dreaming with my BFF to 90s pop-rock" or "I'm in the car and feel like celebrating with extraterrestrials to jazz vocals." The Find It section allows users to find new music by genre, activity (hundreds of different activities are available from BBQing to Studying), or curator. Curators include important names in the music industry, such as the Academy of Country Music, *DJ Mag*, Pitchfork, Rap Radar, *Rolling Stone*, and many more.

Because the focus of Beats Music is to present listeners with new music discoveries, the search option is not as obvious as with other streaming services. Hidden in a side bar, the search function is not very robust and

can only handle searches for specific album titles or artists (not usually in combination), some of which bring irrelevant search results. Not surprisingly, there are no uniform titles in the Beats Music metadata, and even the names of artists are sometimes not standardized, making a search for all the works by one artist difficult at times. Musicians or listeners looking for a particular recording of a Beethoven Sonata, for example, may have trouble tracking it down in a Beats' search, which could prove a major obstacle for music library patrons trying to use Beats to study or prepare for a performance. A student wanting to explore rare pieces composed by Sibelius, however, would find Beats Music a useful tool. Beats' strength lies in its ability to introduce the listener to new, unexplored music or deeper cuts from already familiar artists, not to give users the ability to search.

While Beats offers a Web interface, it is much less robust than the mobile app version and has more bugs, including a long initial loading time. The interface for the Web application includes a Just For You/Highlights page and the ability to search. This is in contrast to the strong desktop application offered by Spotify, which, for listeners who often use a computer to listen to music and have a strong local collection, serves those needs much more sufficiently. However, perhaps one reason Beats Music is so much more focused on the mobile app is because of its mission to provide a more intimate, personalized music-listening experience, which can be accomplished more efficiently on a mobile device which is always at hand.[5]

An important element of most music streaming services is their social networking functions and capabilities. Spotify, for example, is strongly linked to Facebook and posts listening habits to Spotify users' walls. Beats Music, on the other hand, is not nearly so connected to other social media sites, which to some may serve as a relief. While some listeners enjoy sharing their music tastes with friends, Beats is more interested in sharing its curator's music suggestions with the listener, making the listening experience a little more personal and isolated. For music libraries, avoiding the confusion and limitations of connecting a streaming service with social media may be a benefit of choosing Beats.

USER EXPERIENCE

One of the biggest improvements that Beats offers is a visually appealing interface, which builds on its already strong brand messaging. With a dark, carefully designed scheme, Beats provides an aesthetically positive experience for listeners, especially those listening on a mobile device which may be used in dark environments.

Arguably, the strongest offering of Beats Music is its music curation abilities. As previously mentioned, playlists, albums, and artists recommended to Beats users are curated by real people (many of whom are musicians or in

the music industry) instead of through a computer algorithm. In the author's experience using streaming services that allow for user input (such as by "liking" certain songs or albums), Beats Music surpasses other services significantly in this arena. Beats curators find appropriate playlists, artists, and albums for even a musical taste that is greatly varied, something that was noticeably lacking from other services like Spotify and Pandora. However, the success of the curation is somewhat dependent on the musical tastes of the user—for classical music, Beats Music is less strong at suggesting appropriate music than with popular music.

While the curation services offered by Beats Music are extremely strong, for users who want to find their favorite artists and albums instead of having a guided, exploratory experience, Beats is not the best option. One of the underlying values of Beats Music founders is that "music is emotion and life" (beatsmusic.com); music is not just a product, but a deeper experience and part of a relationship with the listener that grows and changes. Some listeners will appreciate the attempt of Beats to build a strong relationship between the user's preferences and activities and the musical fabric of their lives, while others will find this kind of intrusion unnecessary and frustrating. Beats Music is not designed to accommodate the needs of scholars doing research; however, for those listeners looking for a deeper, less-controlled connection with a genre of music, Beats is a strong contender.

One element that might be missing from the Beats Music user experience is the ability to explore the metadata or history of an artist or recording more deeply. The nature of Beats appeals to users who are music-lovers interested in exploring new areas of music, so having the ability to see liner notes, other works in which artists are involved, and how artists are related, for example, would provide a more complete music-listening experience for many Beats users. Perhaps if the service was more like a database providing artist details and connections (i.e., AllMusic), the service would satisfy a currently unmet need of on-demand service users and surpass its competitors.

CONCLUSION

It is still unclear which service is the dominator of the music streaming services market, and there are many options for the consumer from which to choose. However, the strengths of Beats Music might set it apart for librarians making a choice about purchasing a subscription. With visually appealing interfaces and strong curation by music industry leaders, Beats Music can provide users with an exploratory, rich experience of music discovery. However, Beats cannot offer a desktop application; a free, thinned-down version of its services; or strong search functions for users with a specific performance in mind. Whether or not these weaknesses outweigh the strengths

Beats Music offers, the release of this strong contender in the growing market of on-demand music streaming services suggests that music libraries should be considering these services seriously and how they can benefit the patrons we serve.

Mandi Goodsett
Performing Arts & Humanities Librarian
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, OH

NOTES

1. Alex Pham, "Beats Music Streaming Service Launching January 21," *Billboard*, January 11, 2014. http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/5869549/beats-music-streaming-service-launching-january-21 (accessed March 3, 2014).

2. Andrew Martonik, "Beats Music Review: Yet Another Music Service, and One that Still Needs Some Work," *Android Central*, January 31, 2014. http://www.androidcentral.com/beats-music-yet-another-music-service-and-one-needs-some-work (accessed March 3, 2014).

3. Steve Knopper, "7 Things You Should Know About Beats Music," *Rolling Stone*, December 5, 2013. http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/7-things-you-should-know-about-beats-music-20131205 (accessed March 3, 2014).

4. Randall Roberts, "Beats Music Streams Impressive Playlists, but Geeks Want So Much More," *LA Times*, February 21, 2014. http://latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-beats-music-review-20140221,0,338005.story (accessed March 3, 2014).

5. Ann Powers, "Computer Love: Beats Music Wants to Be Your Everything," *NPR*, February 19, 2014. http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2014/02/18/279239760/computer-love-beats-wants-to-be-your-everything (accessed March 3, 2014).

LIBRARY MUSIC SOURCE,
http://librarymusicsource.com

Library Music Source (LMS) is an online sheet music library containing over 35,000 different titles. The resource aims to be the best online collection of Western Classical sheet music and supports that assertion through three claims: providing "the best editions and best quality," offering "the best selection," and being "the easiest to use" for customers. The content of LMS draws from several sources, including CD Sheet Music, Orchestra Musicians' CD-ROM Library, and Accompaniment Studio. Traditionally available in only physical CD-ROM format (Accompaniment Studio being the exception), LMS seems to be the natural digital outgrowth of these established services. CD Sheet Music, LLC is a joint venture of Subito Music Corporation and Stephens Development Company, which is the parent organization of LMS and Orchestra Musicians' CD-ROM Library.

The Web site offers an excellent product, providing enhanced digital copies of the works of many important composers, which have been