

ELECTRONIC MUSIC PRODUCTION AND  
MUSICAL EXPECTATION CHARACTERISTICS

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A Research Paper

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by

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## Introduction

If you have a laptop, a pair of reference monitors (preferably good ones in a good sounding room) and a selection of software, you may theoretically produce a full electronic music album, without help of any other musician or engineer. Furthermore, with the help of new user-friendly programs, even amateurs are able to produce electronic music with the help of sample and loop banks. Similar to the fact that Gutenberg's invention of mechanical printing changed history with the spread of learning to the masses, the introduction of electronics to music changed music history as it provided countless opportunities to musicians.

## Music Genre and Musical Expectation

*“Musicians tend to think of style in terms of chronological period, provenance, nationality, genre, composer, and work. In terms of cognition, however, style is simply repetition.”* (Narmour 1999, 441).

Being exposed to a particular genre makes a listener be able to recognize similarity between the previously learned values of the genre in question and what he or she hears. Eugene Narmour states that listeners construct stylistic expectations that are remarkably specific, surprisingly complex and incredibly detailed (1999, 441). Even though these stylistic expectations may vary from culture to culture, the main aspects of them will stay similar. These

expectations may be related to composition, instrumentation, arrangement, rhythm, frequency response, dynamics, spatial properties and other qualities.

As the origins of genres play a big role on how it is understood by the society, the individual progress and the interaction between others form expectations for each single one of them. As it may be observed from the relationship between blues, jazz and rock and roll, a genre evolves under the influence of many other genres. Because of the fact that the evolution of a genre depends on time period and many sociological variables such as politics, a music genre may be referred as a litmus paper which exposes musical expectations of a particular society with a particular music taste.

#### Distinction of Electronic Music

One of the main differences between electronic music production and production in other genres is the fact that there are fewer boundaries in electronic music in terms of *instrumentation*. A rock song generally uses powerful drums and guitar, a classical music piece is expected to include the instruments found in an orchestra, a reggae song without percussion sounds odd... On the contrary, an electronic musician is free to use any of the sounds he is able to create via his or her tools.

The wide range of production possibilities triggered many popular sub-genres such as electronica, trance, drum and bass, ambient, glitch, house and techno, in addition to many avant-garde approaches such as electro-acoustic music and audio-visual sampling. Since the genres share common musical and technical characteristics in general, these new sub-genres generated new expectation sets in societies. In terms of creation, electronic musicians were almost completely free at the early days of electronic music due to the lack of a solid *listener*

*expectation*. The reaction of the society started to set some rules regarding electronic music production inevitably after a while.

The new expectation sets formed by the new sub-genres may be found relatively purer and more distinctive in terms of musical structure, comparing to the expectation sets of other traditional genres. The reason may probably be the fact that the expectation sets for these young genres were created by societies as a reaction to a collection of unique musical work which did not sound like anything familiar and which cannot be regarded as a product of another genre, in a relatively short period of time. These exclusive expectation sets give electronic music a distinctive role in music cognition analysis. One may argue that production choices reveal listener expectations for electronic music better, due to the special circumstances explained earlier.

Furthermore, some sub-genres of electronic music which are generally created to make people dance such as trance, industrial and house, reveal the rhythmical expectations of a society very well, as dance is generally regarded as a form of art which represents the expression and communication characteristics of a society. Hence, one may suggest that the electronic dance music production preferences of musicians from a specific culture may exhibit the expression and communication characteristics in question, due to the burden of making people dance.

Therefore, studying musical and technical characteristics of an electronic music sub-genre may provide essential information regarding listener expectation. Inductive reasoning may help us to use the findings of a musical and technical analysis of a genre in understanding music perception, as they reveal many aspects of listener expectation characteristics. Moreover, a study which focuses on analyzing electronic music production and how its qualities vary in different

cultures may deliver critical data to any research which concentrates on how individuals from various cultural groups perceive music.

*“Adults bring a large store of implicit knowledge to bear in listening to music. This knowledge includes implicit representations of the tonal framework of the culture in terms of which expected events are processed efficiently and in terms of which pitches are interpreted in their musical context. This store of knowledge includes knowledge of the timing patterns of music in the culture, so that the listener is able to focus attention on moments in time at which critical information is likely to occur”* (Dowling 1999, 621)

#### Discussion

*“Matching an emerging implicative pattern to the learned continuation of a previously stored schema tends to be automatic; we are rarely aware of it. Yet many stylistic representations lie just below the conscious surface. These are thus introspectively accessible. Were this not so, the study of musical style would be impossible. So would any attempt to test the psychological reality of stylistic knowledge.”* (Narmour 1999, 441).

We can easily and automatically recognize the genre of a piece of music when exposed even for a few seconds. Understanding this fast but complicated process of brain may let us explore musical expectation and therefore music perception. Similar to any knowledge learned by time under the influence of the culture and other social motives, genre information and how it is stored in the memory may be regarded as great sources to be analyzed in order to understand how people develop expectations.

Studying musical expectation is a very tough task as there are countless variables to deal with. Therefore, one may claim that it would be the best to start with a genre which has unique production characteristics, is relatively younger and therefore has less factors to keep in mind while analyzing creation preferences.

As we know that a music genre manifests a number of shared and repeated musical qualities which are being applied to songs to address a target audience with particular musical taste, socio-economic status and cultural background, one may claim that electronic music is one of the most suitable genres to observe production choices in order to analyze listeners' expectation, because of its unique characteristics discussed in this paper.

## Bibliography

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