Pleasure Beats: Rhythm and the Aesthetics of Current Electronic Music

Ben Neill

ABSTRACT

The division between high-art electronic music and pop electronic music is best defined in terms of rhythmic content. Pop electronic music uses repetitive beats, primarily in 4/4 time, but a new generation of composers is working within that structure to create what is essentially the new art music. This phenomenon is an outgrowth of such historical currents as minimalism and postmodernism, along with the continuing development of a global technoculture; it is part of a larger cultural shift in which art is becoming more connected with society rather than being created by and for specialists. This positive development is being accelerated by the rapid evolution of new technologies for producing and reproducing music today, as well as by new possibilities for distribution and dissemination of music electronically.

At this particular moment in the history of computer music, the flow of ideas between high art and popular art seems to have a particular significance. Indeed, the protective parapet that has long kept high art and popular art mutually exclusive seems to be showing signs of vulnerability. It seems that we are about to enter a new cultural architecture that we cannot yet describe; yet we are aware that technology is changing the world and that it will also change the world of computer music.

—Joel Chadabe [1]

Rhythm has always been the life of the party, and now, perhaps more than ever, it is the life of the art itself.

—Jon Pareles [2]

What is the distinction between popular and high-art computer music? As Joel Chadabe pointed out in a recent article for *Computer Music Journal* [3], these are two worlds that rarely intersect, but that seem inevitably drawn together at this juncture in history. The question can be answered in one word—rhythm. It is the beat that draws the dividing line between serious and vernacular, visceral and intellectual. Pulse equals life equals pleasure. While composers used to define themselves in terms of tonal style (atonality, serialism, octatonic, modal, etc.), those distinctions have been largely superseded by rhythmic content. The two worlds of high art and popular electronic music may use slightly different tools, but their aesthetic approaches are most clearly defined in terms of the presence or absence of repetitive beats. Jon Pareles's brilliant *New York Times* article, "The Rhythm Century," explains how rhythm was the "engine of transformation for 20th century music" [4] in everything from *Le Sacre du Printemps* to jazz to the programmed beats of drum 'n' bass and techno. I believe that this analysis of the last century of music is correct, and that electronic music is no exception to it.

Minimalism changed art music radically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, largely by reintroducing the beat and repetitive structures into the abstract complexity of 1950s serialism and chance-based works. Art music became physical again, connected to pleasure through the visceral elements of world- and popular-music influences. Minimalist composers performed their music using the amplification and instrumentation of current pop music, adding to the pleasure quotient in their works.

> One could imagine that some future history of music will describe the period starting in the late 20th century as follows: "Our current musical language arose in the 1960's and 70's. In its nascent, simplistic state it was at first mistaken for a full blown style in itself, and was termed "Minimalism" [5].

Following on minimalism's groundbreaking innovations, postmodernism gave 1980s art-music composers license to utilize popular culture elements and techniques as never before, and composers such as Glenn Branca, Rhys Chatham, Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, Todd Levin and myself borrowed heavily from pop structures. Improvisers such as John Zorn also incorporated popular elements in their works, but used them in a more ironic, detached way, never really embracing popular culture but rather deconstructing or critiquing it from outside.

In the past 10 years, a new breed of composers, with no regard for the former distinctions of pop versus high art, has evolved. Their new aesthetic approach has been made possible by the continuing evolution of computer music technologies that started in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the aesthetic progression of late–20th-century culture into a more global, less Eurocentric form. Many art-music composers scoff at the idea of using regular 4/4 rhythm patterns in their works; current Kitchen curator and composer John King has described this attitude as "the fear of the funk" [6]. It is not difficult to understand this bias, since much of the development of 20th-century art music up until minimalism was an evolution toward more and more harmonic, melodic and rhythmic complexity.

> The music schools, the established composers, had been telling youngsters that music, to be valid, should be complex, dissonant, difficult to understand. Throughout the '60s the world of musical composition had been hermetically cut off, by its own choice, from the rest of society [7].

This attitude is also reminiscent of the bias many classical musicians have traditionally taken toward jazz and improvisation, feeling that it is too vernacular or unsophisticated for their interest. It is no coincidence that the minimalists (e.g. La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass) were

Ben Neill, 53 Mercer Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10013, U.S.A. E-mail: <ben@greenbeet.com>.

also actively involved with jazz and/or various forms of world music.

The development and evolution of beat construction in current electronic dance music is a highly sophisticated art form in itself, which changes rapidly in its transmission through global networks. Just as composers in earlier historical periods often worked within a given set of large-scale formal parameters (sonata form, dance forms, tone poems, etc.), innovative pop electronic composers use steady pulse, loop-based structures and 4/4 time as a vehicle for a wide range of compositional ideas and innovations. Shifts of tempo, subdivision, sonic manipulation and complex quantization structures are making beat science the new jazz of the 21st century. Much in the same way that jazz soloists listened to each other and incorporated each other's licks into their own solos, beat makers around the world listen and learn from each other through the underground network of DJs, 12-inch white-label vinyl records, mp3s, CDRs and the Internet. The artistry of pushing a new style of beat forward is highly refined; at any given time there are many styles being practiced and developed along with new hybrids forming and new genres constantly emerging. Pop electronic music is also rapidly incorporating many elements of art music: experimental live performance techniques (Richie Hawtin, Tortoise, Coldcut), conceptual and process-oriented composition (Thomas Brinkmann, Aphex Twin, Oval), collage (Avalanches, DJ Shadow, DJ Spooky), performance art and theatrical spectacle (Fischerspooner, Rabbit in the Moon) and the extensive use of experimental software and hardware can be seen turning up in clubs and on dance records around the world. The laptop is replacing the acoustic guitar as a primary instrument of expression for scores of new musicians.

The contrasting cultures of high art and popular art reflect the antipodal extremes of a social and cultural order that has been in existence in the western world since the Renaissance [8].

Having started my career in the post-modern art-music scene of downtown New York in the mid-1980s, I made the emergent global technoculture of DJs, dance-music subgenres and the musical moniker "electronica" my focus starting around 1993. I had incorporated programmed and live repetitive beats into my earliest compositions, mostly presenting these pieces in art-music venues. The opportunity to play my music for a larger, more diverse audience was something I had been searching for; as I understood it, "downtown" music in New York was aimed at making art music a popular form, proving that art had truly been liberated from the confines of the modernist ivory tower, taking the cultural advances of Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Steve Reich and Terry Riley to a new level. This approach was not widely recognized by other art-music composers; one of the only others to make the shift to dance music and DJ culture was David Linton, who had drummed with Rhys Chatham in the 1980s and developed a solo interactive drum-performance system around the same time. Linton was responsible for producing such important events as the early Soundlab parties and, more recently, an electronic performance series entitled Unity Gain.

In my position as music curator of the Kitchen from 1992–1998, I gave much of my attention to this new genre of music. The Tone monthly series, co-curated with DJ Spooky and DJ Olive, combined DJs and electronica artists with art-music composers and performers. I saw then in the early 1990s that electronica *was* the new art music, and that it was important to make the connection between what is and what has been, between the future and the past. My own artistic project over the last 8 years has been to utilize the most sophisticated technologies of experimental art music with my self-designed *mutantrumpet* in the context of electronica's groove-based genres. In other words, I have come down squarely on the side of music with a consistent pulse.

One of the key ideas to come out of recent electronic pop culture is the "rave" sensibility in which the traditional notions of performer and audience are completely erased and redefined. In this type of event, the artists are not the center of attention; instead it is the role of the artist to channel the energy of the crowd and create the proper backdrop for their social interaction. The audience truly becomes the performance, an idea that was explored by the avant-garde for years but did not have the same impact as in the current electronic pop music because of the limited audience for classical avant-garde events. Chadabe describes the audiences for art and pop electronic musics in the following way:

> Computer music is aimed at an elite group of listeners that constitutes a segment of aristocratic high-art music culture. The elite group of listeners is small in number—smaller than the elite group that appreciates Wagner, for example—because the technology and the artistic concepts that have grown out of computer music are so new that a larger elite group has not yet had the time to grow.
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> Popular electronic music, on the other hand, exists within a commercial entertainment culture. A song or a performing group is in effect a product designed to be immediately successful within a targeted segment of the mass market. Further, immediate success demands involvement and participation by the public. It follows that popular electronic music is consumed by its public primarily in clubs where the public participates by dancing and that it is appreciated more in physical than intellectual terms [9].

This is another aspect of the difference between art and pop electronic music. At the 2001 Coachella Festival in Indio, California, pop electronic music was presented in a large-scale festival format with eight stages and thousands of people—certainly it was one of the largest electronic-music concerts ever presented in the U.S. While rock bands such as Weezer and Jane's Addiction also performed, the large majority of performers were electronic artists and DJs. Peter Kruder, Doc Martin, Fatboy Slim, the Chemical Brothers, Adam Freeland and St. Germain (one of the only groups to incorporate live instruments), all presented outstanding sets (Fig. 1).

For me, however, the unquestionable highlight of the event was a performance by Squarepusher, a.k.a. Tom Jenkinson. His set took place in one of the tents, crowded with approximately 2,500 people, all standing. Jenkinson's set was uncompromisingly experimental in nature. The performance consisted of playback of pre-recorded music; it was essentially a tape-music performance, with little or no sonic manipulation. While many artists and DJs adapt their music to the setting, in this case a huge pop dance event, Squarepusher presented 1½ hours of music in which long stretches of highly processed digital noise and textures that would rival any art-music composer's sonic palette alternated with completely frenzied hyperspeed beats that exceeded 200 beats per minute—hardly dance music as anyone on this planet would recognize it. As I stood in the packed tent, feeling the waves of sonic processing that made my body feel as if it were turning inside out, there came to mind the early works of Edgar Varèse—the stunned audience in the Philips pavilion hearing the *Poème Électronique* for the first time. This truly was a new, exploratory experience, and the audience was an essential part of the innovation. The context was different, however. No longer was this type of music relegated to a rarefied, unique performance situation. Experimentation had fully made its way to popular culture and a mass audience, a significant cultural

Fig. 1. Fatboy Slim performing at the Coachella Festival, Indio, California, May 2001. (Photo © Carolyn Sachs)

transmigration from the Varèse performance 50 years ago.

Squarepusher's music and the work of others, including Thomas Brinkmann, Aphex Twin, Richie Hawtin, Richard Devine and the Future Sound of London (to name a few) prove that it is possible for rhythmic electronic-music composers to work with the most abstract sound processes, experimental textures and techniques, as well as rhythmic materials that make references to, but do not fit within, specific pre-existing dance music genres. However, even if electronic art-music composers incorporate rhythmic elements in their works, it is very unusual for their music to be heard outside of the rarefied world of academic computer-music festivals. While popular electronic artists and audiences feel comfortable embracing the experimental sound production methods and ideas of art music, the crossover rarely goes the other way. High-art computer music that has not been directly influenced by minimalism and postmodernism remains elitist and disconnected from the larger cultural sphere, rendering it largely ineffectual as a 21st-century art form. This way of thinking is certainly not limited to electronic-music circles. Many classical music critics have written about the demise of classical music as we know it on a broader scale, and music for theater and film has greatly overshadowed the new orchestral repertoire. This is part of the same cultural phenomenon that is happening in electronic music, but due to the speed that new technologies bring to its production and presentation, electronic music is taking a leading role over acoustic music. I would submit that because of these technological advances, this is a unique moment in history in which music is also leading the visual arts. Electronic-music composers can work in a way very similar to that of painters and sculptors; being self-contained and not relying on others to perform or create one's art speeds up the process greatly.

Like Chadabe, I believe the oppositional situation between high art and pop electronic music is in the process of shifting. However, I see the merger of the two sides a bit differently than he. While his prediction that art music will achieve new levels of accessibility through new interactive technologies may be true (the Brain Opera of Tod Machover is a good example of that approach), I believe that pop music will ultimately consume what was known as art music and that we will see a period in which art is consumed and enjoyed by a much wider public than at any time in recent history. There are historical precedents for this; the early operas of Monteverdi were a popular entertainment, as was much of the music of the 19th century, which remains the bulk of classical repertoire.

I believe that this shift is part of a larger cultural change, something that the late writer Terence McKenna described as the Archaic Revival [10]. McKenna suggested that through the emerging electronic media and connectivity art would assume a role similar to its position in preliterate societies.

> The zeitgeist of hyperspace that is emerging, initially freighted with technology

and cybernetics, requires that it be consciously tuned to an erotic ideal. It is important to articulate the presence of this erotic ideal of the Other early. This is an opportunity to fall in love with the Other, get married and go off to the stars; but it's only an opportunity and not evolutionarily necessary [11].

The musical equivalent of McKenna's erotic ideal is the steady pulse, the beat. Artists, according to McKenna's view, are the contemporary equivalents of shamans in primitive cultures. Electronic pop music and other forms of digital media art are leading the way in this direction, and thus the prejudice against music with a steady rhythmic pulse is rapidly receding into the past. In the 21st century, pop culture *is* culture; this is healthy and desirable, and computer technology is facilitating this important progression. Art has spent long enough being cut off from the larger cultural sphere; now it is time for art to be connected in a new way to reflect the connectivity of an increasingly global culture.

References

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7. Gann [5] p. 11.

8. Chadabe [1] p. 11.

9. Chadabe [1] p. 10.

10. T. McKenna, *The Archaic Revival* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

11. McKenna [10] p. 76.

Glossary

Archaic Revival—the return to a perspective on self and ego that places them within the larger context of planetary life and evolution; the reempowerment of ritual and the rediscovery of shamanism through technology and connectivity.

electronica—a general term used to refer to all types of popular electronic music.

rhythm—in its primary sense, the whole feeling of movement in music, with a strong implication of both regularity and differentiation. Thus, breathing, pulse and tides are all examples of rhythm.

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Ben Neill is a composer and performer and the designer of a unique electroacoustic instrument, the mutantrumpet. He received a Musical Arts degree from Manhattan School of Music in 1986 and studied composition and Indian classical music with minimalist composer La Monte Young. Neill has recorded seven CDs on the Six Degrees, Verve Antilles, Astralwerks, New Tone and Ear-Rational labels and has performed internationally in venues ranging from concert halls to jazz festivals to raves. His sound/light collaborations have been shown extensively at galleries and museums in the United States and Europe. He was music curator of The Kitchen in New York City from 1992–1998.