

C. Rentmeester & J. R. Warren (Eds.), *Heidegger and music*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.  
Chapter 12.

### **Listening to Heidegger and Marx in Electronic Music**

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An analysis of electronic music provides an interesting phenomenon for applying Heidegger's philosophy. At the same time, it can suggest ways to overcome the limitations of that philosophy.

Heidegger's lifework can be considered as centered on three successive analyses: (a) a hermeneutic of human being-in-the-world as interpretation (1927); (b) a description of the being of artifacts as setting-themselves-into-work (1936); and (c) a history of Being leading to our technological epoch (1962). Each of these can be explored through an investigation of electronic music (EM) as it emerged in the 1960s: (a) EM illustrates how one hears noise vs interpreted sound; (b) works of EM open up sonic worlds in which novel oral phenomena are set into work; (c) EM is produced with innovative technologies, which are explored by EM, such as the use of digital synthesizers to manipulate sound parameters.

While Heidegger's writings have transformed twentieth century thought, they have also been shown to be limited by critics such as Adorno and Benjamin from Marxist traditions. For instance: (a) Heidegger's view of authentic man is ideological and individualistic; (b) his analysis of artifacts downplays their ties to modes of production; (c) his account of history ignores its social structuration.

Early EM—from Stockhausen to Pink Floyd and Hendrix—followed a path from inquiring into the nature of sound to exploiting commercial technique. Listening critically to this music, one can observe phenomena that illustrate and amplify Heidegger's insights, but also warn of their shortcomings from a Marxist perspective. For instance, (a) dissonance and feedback problematize the interpretation of sounds, raising not only hermeneutic issues but also political biases; (b) works of EM open innovative aural realms, but also explore historic conditions of technical productivity; (c) EM reflects the burgeoning technological age, but also responds to capitalist production relations.

Heidegger sees the revelation of truth in the working of the work of art. Marx sees the production of art as mediated by technological means. Although neither Heidegger nor Marx explicitly considered music at length, we can see through analysis of phenomena of EM and of its history a potential for understanding both the insights and the limitations of each of these philosophies.

From a Heideggerian perspective, the genre of early EM (a) explored the nature of acoustic reality and new musical possibilities through experimentation with technologies of sound production—all within evolving cultural genres. These works (b) opened up sonic worlds, by exploiting emerging technology. They existed (c) within a technological age, structured by capitalist institutions and pressures.

However, according to a critical Marxist perspective, Heidegger's analyses are not sufficiently grounded in social reality and in structuration processes through which cultural artifacts—like works of EM—are not only structured by the history of Being, but also contribute to that history by instantiating and exploring it. For instance, Heidegger's central example of a van Gogh painting opens up a world in which the being of the painting's subject is set into work. However, the painting's post-impressionist historical context is ignored by Heidegger, as well as the effect of van Gogh's use of light and pigment on the subsequent history of painting. Likewise, his analysis of the Greek vase as unifying the Four ignores the meticulous efforts that go into making a pottery piece, including the techniques and technologies developed socially over generations. Sculpture too does not sui generis open space but does so through the complex processes that go into forming the sculpture. Similarly, we should not only hear how EM opens our ears to technical parameters of sound, but we should also note how EM influenced and was

eventually absorbed into commercial music. Through a careful attunement to EM, we can hear not only how acoustic Being evolved historically (in a Heideggerian sense), but also how that historical process (Ereignis) took place concretely and dialectically (in a Marxian sense). The processes of production unfold within the conditions of technology, as guided by the interests of specific classes.