

Remixes. Remix. Popular Music Research. Potentials for Methodological Redesign¹

André Doehring, Kai Ginkel, Eva Krisper
Kunstuniversität Graz, Austria

Remix: Subject and Relevance

Both remixes and remixing as the total of connected practices, ideologies, and evaluations (from now on: Remix) are considered an important subject and practice of EDM, music that affects a variety of people across the globe every day and is a major driving force in the international musical economy. Given the overabundance of this music and the variety contained within it, it is, therefore, both relevant and necessary to scholarly deal with EDM's current musical life, its cultural creations, and their cultural and economic interplay within our society.

What we call Remix is a practice in which both a product (the remix 12", for example) and a technique (producing a remix) are situated within a professional network of musicians and enterprises. Remixes and remixers have come to constitute a large part of the informal EDM history with names Walter Gibbons, Tom Moulton, Larry Levan, or the C & C Music Factory. These musicians have had a lasting impact on our understandings of Remix, and even today, remix practices in home studios and online remixing contests are informed by these men and their work as their names keep appearing over and over again. Publishing remixes seems common also in the mainstream: German Schlager star Helene Fischer, for example, who sells out football-stadiums and sold at least 15 million records so far, has released a complete album titled *Achterbahn. The Mixes* (2017), featuring eleven different remixes of "Achterbahn" (rollercoaster). It appears likely to conclude that money can be earned from Remix. This argument gets even more support turning to the Berlin-based hardware and software manufacturer Native Instruments who has programmed for its widely used DJ software Traktor so-called 'remix decks', in which small samples or loops are loaded, and with which the musicians can improvise. A further development are so-called 'stems' – split individual audio files of a track, which can be loaded in 'stem decks' and be individually controlled with hardware devices specifically designed for the use of Traktor. Stem tracks are available for purchase on download portals such as Beatport, which has been collaborating with Native Instruments since 2004. Crucially, Beatport is today part of the company LiveStyle, an offshoot of the world's largest and dominant concert promoter LiveNation and the NASDAQ listed company SFX Entertainment, which offers concerts, festivals, tour operators, management, but also music and musicians around the world. In sum, remixes are objects, musical practices, and products on these markets linked to an industrial complex. Moreover, they are lucrative due to their being private and public music practices – practices that can be enabled, controlled, and changed by a single, comprehensive provider.

Challenges of Remix

Historically, popular music research is strongly rooted in the social sciences. Social, cultural, and economic issues are still being investigated to a greater extent than, for example, questions regarding the sonic aspects of popular music (although the latter is gaining momentum, cf. Braae/Hansen 2019, Scotto/Smith/Brackett 2019). This has been in large parts due to problems of valuation and reservations within the discourse of musicology where the disciplinary blinkers of the work paradigm, a fixation with an objective text, such as sheet music, and the aesthetics of "genius" have prevented a more appropriate take on popular musics for a long time. Looking at the existing literature on analysis, there is also a lack of adequate methods adapted to the topic of Remix. Analyses are usu-

¹ This paper outlines the results of work by the authors who have been preparing a three-year research project on the subject in Austria (for detailed information in German see Doehring/Ginkel/Krisper 2019). Doehring and Krisper have presented their ideas at the IASPM XX conference in Canberra in 2019.

ally limited to one version of a track, not several; and rarely do they consider context-sensitive (cf. Appen et al. 2015, Doehring 2017), and radically self-reflective (Doehring 2012) perspectives that acknowledge the concept of affordance (DeNora 2003, Gibson 2014 [1979]). Additionally, rock music-oriented methods and theories of usually male, mostly not-dance-enthusiastic colleagues, have largely prevented a musicological focus on the sort of music that enters the popular charts (Wald 2009). Further related problems for examining Remix include instrumentation (usually electronic or digital instruments instead of rock instruments by default) that lead to new aspects of sound and form of remix tracks. All in all, remixes decidedly differ from the repertoire and methods of rock analysis.

Moreover, there are other locations, spaces, and audiences involved in remix practices. Although plenty of research exists on EDM audiences, we yet see only little scholarly work with a focus on Remix (cf. Navas/Gallagher/burrough 2017). But above all, a major constraint may be an ontological one: *the* remix simply does not exist. We find many, often highly heterogeneous remixes involving a variety of actors in different roles. Who's originator, who's interpreter, and do these terms still make sense in remix practices? Perhaps the question of an "original" in some remixing practices no longer arises, instead, an ingrained construction creates something new on its own.

Based on our preliminary research, we propose a three-part model in descending order of the original's importance: 1) Remix as an expansion of the product range such as Helene Fischer's remixes (2017) – all but one convey to the song form, and her voice as an acoustic trademark must not be edited by the remixers; 2) Remix in the sense of Warhol's concept of copy or reproduction as we find it in the remixes of the Pet Shop Boys (2016); 3) Remix in the sense of the catalytic initiation of new creations: Here, a remix track is regarded as a self-contained musical product whose relationship to the 'original' is no longer apparent and has to become part of the title for marketing reasons, e.g. when Marcel Dettman remixes Fever Ray (2009).

In a nutshell, Remix exists as a catch-all buzzword, an aesthetic idea, a musical and socio-technical practice, and not least as a decades-old market within popular music. Existing research has been fruitful. A broader study, however, in which the general and musical practices of Remix is addressed, including the role of technical artifacts, has not yet been conducted. This is why we've designed an interdisciplinary research project that seeks to avoid the epistemic limitations of individual disciplines and instead develops a comprehensive approach to researching this music, its related social practices, and the historical construction of Remix.

Methodological Reflections

The project, covering a research period of three years, was planned in the context of the overall project outline and with a view to realistic funding opportunities and research objectives. We suggest a combination of musicological and sociological research methods. Throughout the research process, context-sensitive analysis, ethnographic field research, and regular group interpretations of the collected data should enable the results to be interlinked and re-adjusted. In particular, group interpretations ensure important interdisciplinarity that goes beyond the mere division of labor between the individual disciplines involved (Barry/Born 2013). By this approach, the process of coding and interpretation will take a constructivist approach informed by recent developments in Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014). For a look at the remix practices, it is essential not to ask about the actions of individual musicians and the motivations behind them, but rather about the recognizable practical forms of knowledge and proficiency that ensure remixing as a social practice (Reckwitz 2002, Schatzki 2002). This includes a focus on human bodies, 'artifacts' (Latour 2005), networking, and work. Relevant artifacts are in this case instruments, soundtracks, or software. As "carriers of social rules", they decisively shape the remixing practices, by "asking" for certain procedures or by impeding unorthodox practices (Schmidt 2012: 63 f.). At the same time, the musical form is an integral part and result of these practices in which negotiations between clients (e.g., labels) and contractors (vulgo: musicians) allow for and shape musical products. We want to illuminate the entire musical practice of remixing in all its facets. We investigate Remix as a professional, commissioned, evaluated, and valued musical practice of contemporary production in electronic dance music that has specific features, produces musical products, and can succeed in a marketplace.

By approaching musical analysis as context-sensitive, we understand the musical form to be interlinked with the processes of its creation, with the places and situations from which it emerges, and the places and situations in which it is always subjectively received. The latter applies particularly for us researchers who engage with the tracks. Music research is always done by scholars who hear, understand, and interpret the music in a historically specific situation (Doehring 2015), so "there is no perspectiveless position" from which to start an interpretation

(Moore 2012: 326). To foster an inter-subjective dialogue about these individual ways of understanding music, we will analyze the tracks together in groups (cf. Appen et al. 2015, Doehring/Ginkel/Krisper 2019). At the same time, in the spirit of ethnographic sociology and the ‘studies of work’ approach (Bergmann 2004, Garfinkel 1986), we will be looking at how, where, by whom, and why a remix is made in practice, as a networked, multi-situated, musical, and music-related form of cultural work. We consider those actors as remix experts who are actively and permanently involved in remix practices. From observing what they do and how they do it, we can learn about their skills that are routinely and masterly accomplished: implicit knowledge (Hirschauer 2001, Polanyi 1966). We will also conduct interviews and group discussions with the aforementioned actors to document how knowledge is actually being negotiated within the field. In group interpretations (Reichertz/Bettmann 2018), this collected data will eventually be merged with the analyses of remix tracks that we will encounter in the field. We combine interdisciplinary data to challenge our individual perspectives (or: knowledge we take for granted) and to overcome our disciplinary restrictions (Born 2010).

We will primarily engage in fieldwork in Graz and Vienna as the largest cities in Austria, which gives us the advantage of being permanently present in the field, compared to cities with a rich EDM history like Detroit, Chicago, New York, or London whose shadow, though, might be present in our fields (Barz/Cooley 2008). Knowledge of important networking between the actors involved, for example in creative or organizational terms, can thus be acquired more easily. Since Austria is a relatively small country, the actors in the field rely on close (working) constellations; this makes repeated cooperation (Becker 1974) easily observable. Traveling to places outside the Austrian EDM community may occasionally become part of the fieldwork, to follow identified networks.

Conclusion

Remix practices present a huge field for further multi-disciplinary inquiries. Concerning their special ontologies, a fresh and comprehensive methodological approach is truly in need. What we present here is a joint research project in a team consisting of musicologists and sociologists using field research, analysis, and group interpretations. It allows us to gain insight into private, public, corporate, and institutional ways of creating new from existing sounds under conditions of late-capitalism. We assume to learn more about this special field of creative work, about its implicit knowledge, motivations, pleasures, and pressures as well as the limitations coming from the in- and outside. Sociologists of work (Hesmondhalgh/Baker 2011) have shown how these creative workers have been at the forefront of a rapidly changing neo-liberal understanding of work. In the exchange between musicology and sociology, a theoretically elaborated model of remix may evolve at the end of this project.

This project may also help to think about possible methodological “turns and revolutions” in popular music studies by doing research *on* popular music, research *for* popular music, and research *in* popular music (paraphrasing Henk Borgdorff’s [2007] ideas about artistic research).² The take-away-message here can be summarized in the following points:

1. Cooperative work in teams: During the fieldwork, in group analyses, as well as in the group interpretations, we hold multi-voicedness to be a benefit, not an obstacle for our results.
2. An addition to this, maybe even a precondition, is that interdisciplinarity is being accepted and practiced in a way that Georgina Born (2010: 211) has called “agonistic-antagonistic”.
3. Self-reflexivity and a culture of dialogic interaction are basic requirements of every praxeology and every group analysis when trying to understand musical practices.

Although our project focuses on remixing, this methodology of researching sound and practices possibly aims at other popular music, too.³ Musical practices in the above sense become, hence, a subject of an interdisciplinary turn that in the medium-term leads into the generation of a socio-musicological theory. The rapprochement of musicology and sociology is due, as, for example, Nick Prior (2011) has consistently been calling for. The subject matter of remix demands and, thereby, facilitates a perspective on sound’s structure *and* practices without neglecting essential sociological key terms as work, political economy, or networks and actors. Moreover, remix affords the significant methodological turn to consequently bring these issues together.

² Originally envisaged, the artistic research about Remix has yet to be matched according to different funding schemes in Austria (and vice versa).

³ It is currently used in the research project *Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe* (2019-2022, VW Foundation 94754) for diverse musics as hip hop, country, rock or traditional music where researchers focus on “intersubjectively shared knowledge” (Appen et al. 2015: 5) gathered both in analysis and fieldwork.

References

- Appen, Ralf von / Doehring, André / Helms, Dietrich / Moore, Allan F. (2015). "Introduction." In: *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*. Ed. by Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms, and Allan F. Moore. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 1–6.
- Barry, Andrew / Born, Georgina (2013). "Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences." In: *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of Social and Natural Sciences*. Ed. by Andrew Berry, and Georgina Born. London: Routledge, pp. 1–56.
- Barz, Gregory F. / Cooley, Timothy J. (2008). *Shadows in the Field. New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press (2nd edition).
- Becker, Howard S. (1974). "Art as Collective Action". In: *American Sociological Review* 39 (6), pp. 767–776.
- Bergmann, Jörg (2004). "Ethnomethodology." In: *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. Ed. by Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, and Ines Steinke. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 72–80.
- Borgdorff, Henk (2007). "The Debate on Research in the Arts." In: *Focus on Artistic Research and Development 2*, https://www.ahk.nl/fileadmin/download/ahk/Lectoraten/Borgdorff_publicaties/The_debate_on_research_in_the_arts.pdf (accessed: December 18, 2020).
- Born, Georgina (2010). "For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn." In: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135 (2), pp. 205–243.
- Braae, Nick / Hansen, Kai Arne (eds.) (2019). *On Popular Music and Its Unruly Entanglements*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Charmaz, Kathy (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: SAGE Publications (2nd edition).
- DeNora, Tia (2003). *After Adorno. Rethinking Music Sociology*. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press.
- Doehring, André (2012). „Probleme, Aufgaben und Ziele der Analyse populärer Musik“. In: *Black Box Pop. Analysen populärer Musik* (= Beiträge zur Populärmusikforschung 38). Ed. by Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp.23–42.
- Doehring, André (2015). "Andrés's 'New for U': New for Us. On Analysing Electronic Dance Music." In: *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*. Ed. by Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms, and Allan F. Moore. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 133–155.
- Doehring, André (2017). "Modern Talking, Musicology and I. Analysing and Interpreting Forbidden Fruit." In: *Perspectives on German Popular Music*. Ed. by Michael Ahlers and Christoph Jacke. New York: Routledge, pp. 94–99.
- Doehring, André / Ginkel, Kai / Krisper, Eva (2019). "Remixe. Remixen. Populärmusikforschung: Potentiale für methodologische Neugestaltungen." In: *(Dis-) Orienting Sounds. Machtkritische Perspektiven auf populäre Musik* (= Beiträge zur Populärmusikforschung 45). Ed. by Ralf von Appen and Mario Dunkel. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 283–304.
- Garfinkel, Harold (ed.) (1986). *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Gibson, James J. (2014) [1979]. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Classic edition. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, David / Baker, Sarah (2011). *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Hirschauer, Stefan (2001). "Ethnografisches Schreiben und die Schweigsamkeit des Sozialen. Zu einer Methodologie der Beschreibung." In: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 30 (6), pp. 429–451.
- Latour, Bruno (2005). *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Allan F. (2012). *Song Means. Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Navas, Eduardo / Gallagher, Owen / burrough, xtine (eds.) (2017). *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Polanyi, Michael (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Prior, Nick (2011). "Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond." In: *Cultural Sociology* 5 (1): pp. 121–138.
- Reckwitz, Andreas (2002). "Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing." In: *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2), pp. 243–263.
- Reichertz, Jo / Bettmann, Richard (2018). „Interpretationsgruppen oder: Gemeinsam interpretieren als komplexer Kollaborationsprozess.“ In: *Wissenskulturen der Soziologie*. Ed. by Reiner Keller and Angelika Pofert. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa, pp. 289–301.
- Schatzki, Theodore R. (2002). *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Schmidt, Robert (2012). *Soziologie der Praktiken. Konzeptionelle Studien und empirische Analysen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Scott, Ciro / Smith, Kenneth M. / Brackett, John (eds.) (2019). *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Wald, Elijah (2009). *How the Beatles destroyed rock'n'roll. An alternative history of American popular music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Discography

- Fever Ray (2009). *Seven*. Rabid Records RABID043T.
- Fischer, Helene (2017). *Achterbahn. The Mixes*. Polydor 6712558.
- Pet Shop Boys (2016). *The Pop Kids (Remixes)*. X2 5060454942740.