Is Electronic Music 'Real Music?'
Analysis by Robert Lamb
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Electronic artist Aphex Twin performs for a live crowd. (Charley Gallay/Getty Images)

From the use of Auto-Tuned pop music to such popular subgenres as dubstep, electronic music seems to be everywhere. But is it "real music," or something inauthentic and artificial?

"I would've heard that much more maybe five or 10 years ago," says Atlanta-based electronic artist Richard Devine, "but I think now the digital age has pretty much changed everything. You listen to pop music now as opposed to 20 years ago, and it sounds very synthetic; it's very electronic-influenced."

BLOG: Play Music With Your Mind

Devine himself has released five albums of electronic music since 1995, and in that time has heard electronic music become the mainstream culture.

"It's not this alien thing that's looked upon as unreal music anymore," Devine says.

Why have we come to accept electronic music, then? Why did we oppose it and what sort of technologically enhanced music awaits us in the future?

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Music and Technology
Modern acceptance of electronic music hardly comes as a surprise to Parag Chordia. The assistant professor at Georgia Tech Center for Music Technology compares the story of electronic music to the history of the piano. As this 17th century technology spread, musicians no longer had to master a particular bow technique on the violin or cello in order to play the perfect note.

They just had to press a key.

"I'm sure at the time people thought the piano was destroying the soul of our music," Chordia says. "It simplifies things. It reduces what is really essential and human. People have this deep feeling that music should be authentic. And I think the reason why it's so important for music to be authentic is because it's so powerful emotionally."

The more basic the emotions involved, says Chordia, the less listeners want to feel like that someone is simply pushing a button. They want to believe the music they love is an authentic human expression.

"The piano obviously didn't destroy music," Chordia says. "What it did in fact was create a branch. Composers took advantage of its technical capabilities, and they created an amazing repertoire that really blossomed in the 19th century.

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Electronic Sounds, Human Creativity
Computer technology has evolved tremendously over the past few decades, and electronic music has definitely followed suit. But are humans still at the creative core of the craft, or have we become lost in the shuffle?

When Richard Devine first started out in the early '90s, music-making software for the personal computer was a rarity. For today's would-be musicians, however, countless programs are just a few keystrokes away -- and that's not necessarily a good thing.

"I think [the technology] sometimes makes people lazy," Devine says. "When I have too many resources at my fingertips, I have a tendency to get really lazy with the creativity. So for me, I try to limit myself with how many tools I use. I try to just keep it to a couple pieces of equipment and learn those pieces of equipment really, really well."

An accomplished musician in his own right, Parag Chordia specializes in a particular piece of musical technology known as the sarod, a staple of North Indian classical music dating back thousands of years. Whether you're considering this ancient stringed instrument, a modern music program or a Paleolithic bone flute, Chordia insists the basic principle is always the same.

NEWS: Why Music Makes You Happy

"Music and technology are fundamentally something that have gone together since the earliest forms of music," Chordia says. "What are bone flutes but examples of humans taking the resources around them, manipulating them in some way and fashioning something for their own delight or for some kind of particular purpose?"

This, Chordia stresses, is the very definition of technology. Humans manipulate the environment to create something new and interesting or useful. Today, that environment is increasingly electronic.

Robotic Sounds

In creating the alien soundscapes that fill his albums, Devine engages in an area of musical composition that, to some critics, exemplifies our anxieties concerning technology's relationship with creative authenticity: algorithmic composition. After all, where is the humanity in a tune authored by machines?

Fear not, humans. According to Devine, creativity is still very much a part of the process.
"If you're using like an algorithmic-based approach, you're usually using some sort of software environment like Reactor or Symbolic Composer, where you start off with a blank slate and then create the environment," Devine says. "It's really interesting because you're defining the rules and the environment, and then you can decide how that environment behaves."

What emerges from this environment, Devine says, is pure musical discovery.

How might algorithmic composition technology change the face of music? A 2010 article on electronic music site Synthtopia predicted that so-called "fixed music" will become a thing of the past as "intelligent music" molds itself to a specific physical environment or set of listener preferences.

When asked about this possible eventuality, Chordia points to the fact that the term "fixed music" is at best a product of the recording age, if not an outright abstraction.

[BLOG: Clothing Plays Music When Touched](#)

"Is it fixed in terms of like what you recorded digitally on your computer?" Chordia asks. "Is it fixed in terms of what your brain is actually decoding? Because the act of listening is extremely context dependent."

Prior to the age of recorded music, these listeners played a vital role in the shape of most forms of music. While the latest Beyonce signal doesn't (yet) alter based on your particular mood, musicians have been shaping their music to fit live audiences throughout human history.

"As a musician, you are sensitive to your audience and participate collectively in creating some kind of musical experience," Chordia says. "So I think technology is obviously going to be a part of that, too."