

Basic Channel and Timelessness: Negotiating Canonisation, Resemblance and Repetition in House and Techno

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In the related musical worlds of house and techno, there is rarely a shortage of new sounds to complement and complicate what is already a saturated archive. Across a wide spectrum of scenes, from the adamantly underground to the unabashedly mainstream, tracks seem to appear almost as reliably and consistently as the kick drums that characterise the sound. Of course, much of this material has only fleeting significance. Functional, generic 'DJ tools' circulate for a short period, before being replaced by similarly ephemeral tracks. Attali's notion of 'repeating' comes to mind, in which 'the minor modification of a precedent' becomes the thinly disguised replacement of innovation (1977: 109). Yet, within this ever-expanding cultural cache, certain tracks have managed to attain a greater longevity, forming what may tentatively be thought of as a canonic repertoire. Here I employ the concept of canon in Katharine Bergeron's prescriptive sense, to denote a 'locus of discipline' that constructs standardised values and behaviours, within prescribed and internalised networks of power (1992: 2-4). This formulation emphasises the nature of canons as on-going, cultural processes of construction, and thus as necessary sites for reflexive critique.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to undertake a comparative close reading of two techno tracks that share apparent similarities, both stylistically and in terms of production practice, despite their temporal separation of seventeen years. The first, 'M-4' (1995) by Maurizio has, as I will go on to describe, received a degree of enduring critical acclaim that I would argue affords it a canonic status within the genre. Conversely, 'Infinity' by b-trak (2012), a release that bears many resemblances with 'M-4', has received no critical attention and seems likely to have a more transient destiny.¹

This comparison will serve as a means from which critically to engage with the interrelated issues of canon and historical influence in house and techno. By comparing the tracks in terms of both their textual features and integral particularities of cultural production, I aim to offer some thoughts toward defining notions of the perceived canon, and its relationship to contemporary contexts. Despite having no grand aim to induce more universally applicable theories from such focussed comparisons, I hope that in Clifford Geertz's sense, the 'thick' descriptive comparison will speak for itself, with some kind of 'internal validity' (Tomlinson 1984: 352-3).

After comparing the distinct 'webs of culture' in which these tracks are situated, I will move toward a more specifically sonic focus, with the particular aim of deconstructing pervasive concerns of repetition and minimalism, which I argue, have often functioned as restrictive analytical paradigms. In this sense, I am particularly inspired by the work of Mark J. Butler, who has argued for a greater analytical focus on the 'sonic dimensions of electronic dance music', which he views as 'an essential part of the cultural complex in which EDM is embedded' (2006: 12). By digging beneath the surface of both these 'sonic dimensions' and the interrelated aspects of the dance music 'cultural complex', I will argue for the importance of more nuanced

¹ I have been unable to find any articles, blog posts or reviews relating to this release. Moreover, all record shops and online retailers that stocked this record chose to reproduce the press release provided by the record label, rather than writing their own short review. This is a significant point, as such appraisals play a crucial role in forming the aesthetic identity of these retailers.

and considered understandings of the (dance) musical canon, such that it may become a more constructive foundation for both critical and musical creativities.

Before moving on to the comparative analysis, I will give an overview of responses to 'M-4' and Maurizio more generally, in order to outline the context of their particular critical status.

Basic Channel's critical reception and cultural legacy²

Relatively little has been written on the semi-mythical duo of Moritz von Oswald and Mark Ernestus. In Berlin, during the 1990s, they produced the seven-part *M-Series* under the artist name Maurizio, while operating within a broader web of interrelated collaborative projects, including Basic Channel, Rhythm & Sound, Burial Mix and Main Street. Despite the general lack of journalistic or scholarly attention paid to their work, the writings that do exist are perhaps most characterised by a profound respect. In online reviews of the *M-Series*, potent descriptives like 'eternal', 'classic', 'essential', 'blueprint' and 'seminal' reappear time and again.³ In their occasional media representations, Mark and Moritz have been described as 'Techno-archaeologists' and 'craftsmen of antiquity' (Kopf 1996), who 'practically invented minimal techno' (Von Oswald 2008), as well as 'genetic engineer[s]', who create music that 'remains ageless' or 'timeless' (Walmsley 2010, Klock 2010). A linguistic theme emerges here, combining invocations of the ancient past with notions of eternity. Such far-reaching temporal concerns resonate with Philip Bohlmann's discussions of processes of canon formation, whereby an idealised 'model of the past' is appropriated for the present, preserved for the future, and thus rendered 'timeless' (1992: 204).

Although it may seem drastic to make claims of canonisation for this music from what is ultimately a very small body of existent criticism, the significance of such comments cannot be ignored. As Bohlmann goes on to point out, the contemporary musical 'canonizer' is a diverse category, whose status and definition depends essentially on wielding sufficient 'power' and 'authority' within their cultural field (1992: 206). If any 'institutions' within the house and techno cultural complex may be said to wield such authority, magazines such as the *Wire*, DJs such as Ben Klock, and record shops such as Hard Wax seem likely contenders. Moreover, such veneration is also reflected and reinforced by the tangible demand for Maurizio records, which have been continually re-pressed since their initial release, enjoying an enduring relevance that seems too stable to be conceptualised in revivalist terms.⁴

While such critical consensus begins to establish the specificity of Maurizio's cultural reception, canonisation also implies embedded prescriptive processes, including the standardisation of certain values that contain inherent possibilities for their own replication (Bergeron 1992: 2). In the case of Maurizio and Basic Channel's musical legacy, the entire genre of 'dub techno' has materialised more or less through the sustained imitation and reinterpretation of the 'Basic Channel sound'. (See *Sonic Fiction* 2012).

This tangible impact of Maurizio's canonisation raises numerous questions: why have Basic Channel's creative practices been so influential, and how have they affected the work of subsequent artists? More importantly, how can we formulate a more reflective, nuanced understanding of this legacy, moving beyond simplistic ideas

² As the first of their collaborations, Basic Channel is often used as an umbrella term to represent Mark and Moritz's various collaborative projects, including Maurizio, and I will continue to treat it in this way.

³ I compiled reviews from Hard Wax, Sounds of the Universe, Piccadilly Records and Phonica. While this list is by no means conclusive and certainly Anglo-centric, these shops are undoubtedly influential in dance-music circles and have global reach thanks to their online presence.

⁴ As Tamara Livingston (1999: 76) suggests, 'if a tradition is perceived to be alive and well, there is no need to revive it.'

of resemblance and influence? I hope that such investigations may be constructive to contemporary and historic considerations of house and techno, from both critical and artistic perspectives.

At this point I will shift my focus toward the more specific comparison of 'M-4' and 'Infinity', as one small snapshot of a much larger, multi-layered issue. In a sense, my choice of these two tracks in particular is an arbitrary one. Though 'M-4' is archetypal of Maurizio's sound, there are numerous other tracks in their discography equally suitable for analysis. My choice of 'Infinity' is perhaps even less justifiable, representing a single fairly unremarkable example of the countless Basic Channel-influenced records released over the last fifteen years. More than anything else, the reasons behind these choices are value-laden and subjective. As a fan of house and techno, and Basic Channel/Maurizio in particular, 'M-4' is a personal favourite of mine. Conversely, I purchased 'Infinity' after listening to it briefly in a record shop, but became quite dismissive of the track once I had given it further attention at home. In light of this, I aim to be reflexive toward my own judgements in the following analysis, and be wary of the inherent possibilities for self-indulgence (Cooley and Barz 2008: 20). However, I also feel that the split-second value-judgements I made during my purchase of 'Infinity' are in some ways indicative of the wider issues that I wish to discuss. In that record shop moment, I decided to purchase 'Infinity' because it bore aesthetic similarity with the sorts of house and techno I like. Yet, after my subsequent realisation that this affinity was perhaps quite superficial, I decided that I no longer liked the track, but initially felt unable to understand my own change of opinion. It is precisely this sort of superficiality that I would like to pull apart in the following comparative analysis, in which I aim to present perspectives through which the Maurizio/Basic Channel legacy may be more fully conceptualised.

In this first comparative section, I will focus on the extra-musical aspects of Basic Channel's legacy, analysing their relationship to b-trak's practices of cultural production and representation. By situating these practices within their respective historic contexts, I hope to demonstrate how the significances of standardised canonic models can change with time, and how they can be misinterpreted when 'divorced from the context which gives them meaning' (Tomlinson 1984: 352).

Resemblances, influences and authenticities

Notions of apparent resemblance link the tracks I have chosen for comparison, and before even listening to b-trak's 'Infinity', connections with Basic Channel seem already to be implied. The press release from record label gotwax! describes the music as 'dub-inspired analog sounding techno and house',⁵ seemingly evoking tropes associated with Basic Channel, who are famed for having brought Jamaican dub sensibilities into their electronic productions (see Von Oswald 2008 and Walmsley 2010). Maurizio asserted this inspiration on all of their releases, presenting each 12-inch single as two versions of the same underlying musical material, in line with the reggae tradition of the 'dub' or 'version'.⁶ b-trak's 'Infinity' seems also to align itself with this dub-wise approach. Although the B-side, 'The Answer', is not strictly comprised of the same material as the A-side, it contains sufficiently similar sonic elements that it may certainly be perceived as a dub reworking of the A-side.

Similarly, by describing his music as 'analog sounding', b-trak implies another link with Basic Channel, who are famed for their use of analogue hardware and strict commitments to vinyl culture. While Mark and Moritz have tangibly maintained this reputation through their methods of production and distribution, with little in the way of

⁵ See http://www.gotwax.de/release_gotwax_001/

⁶ See Veal (2007: 45-80) for an outlining of the cultural history and aesthetic practices of the dub version.

verbalised justification, b-trak's desires for such analog associations are explicitly communicated. On the gotwax! website, b-trak's impressive collection of production hardware is meticulously listed, coming across somewhat as a spectacle of analogue fetishism - a fetishism that may be further contextualised within the trendy resurgence of retro aesthetics in certain strands of contemporary house and techno (see Reynolds 2012, 2013). Still, whether we view such tendencies cynically or not, it is clear that they can only be interpreted through critical understandings of dance music's legacies and histories. As Maurizio's use of analogue hardware in 1995 related as much to historical and technological circumstance as it did to aesthetics, it is impossible to maintain an entirely neutral interpretation of b-trak's creative choices, made almost twenty years later in a predominantly digital era.

Thorough historical contextualisation is also necessary to interpret b-trak's choice of musical format, namely the hand-stamped, white-label vinyl. As Jane Fitz (2014) has shown, white label records seems to be part of a voguish contemporary zeitgeist,⁷ but may only be fully comprehended as part of a complex and on-going historical narrative running from the disco-era through to the present. By choosing to participate in this narrative, gotwax! invoke various defining themes from dance music's history, with particular relevance to Basic Channel's legacy.

Firstly, by virtue of its lack of visual information, the white-label has strong connotations of anonymity. Originally, DJs played white-labels as a means to keep the identities of their records secret from audiences.

Extending this sort of tradition, various dance music producers, perhaps most notably Basic Channel, developed this notion of secrecy into an actively maintained artistic anonymity, what Biba Kopf (1996) has called an 'aesthetic of disappearance'. Moritz Von Oswald and Mark Ernestus were notorious for scarcely engaging with the press, and producing records devoid of textual information, with nondescript names such as 'M-4' (see Ex. 1). While the function of such anonymity is intended to foreground features of the 'music itself', it is of course problematic to assume that such an aesthetic necessitates a purer, musical authenticity (see Harper 2013). However, by engaging with this aesthetic, b-trak enters his music into a complex historical web of contexts and competing authenticities. Basic Channel's own desires for anonymity began during a period when techno was being constructed in part as a faceless, functional antidote to the popular music of the time, a desire that was reflected in the lack of vocals and rhythmic focus of the music (Walmsley 2010: 37).

In this sense, anonymity cannot be viewed simply as an ahistorical means to perceived authenticity, it must also be understood as a contextually contingent aesthetic strategy. If the blank or anonymous record label becomes a standardised norm from a purely stylistic perspective, there is potential for its original significances to be lost. While this is not necessarily intended as a direct criticism of contemporary artists' use of such aesthetics, my intention is to emphasise the complexities involved in the standardisation and appropriation of aesthetic values that may be embedded in multifaceted cultural histories.



Ex. 1 Centre label of 'M-4'

⁷ Other house and techno labels using this format include: Novel Sound, Mister Saturday Night and White Material from the USA, as well as WAX, EQD and Giegling from Germany.

This critical foregrounding of contextual contingency is also important in relation to the DIY connotations that are implied by b-track's use of a hand-stamped label (see Ex. 2). The basic assumption of this practice is that it suggests a more direct link between the artist, record label and final musical artefact. Individually stamped labels, with the variations and imperfections of the human touch, bring a



Ex. 2 Centre label of Gotwax! No. 001

sense of personality that is positioned in perceived opposition to the corporate distance of the major label (Fitz 2014). Again, gotwax! seem to make a point of emphasising this particular aesthetic choice and their desire for it's DIY associations, by posting photos of the stamping process on their website.⁸

Although Basic Channel never specifically used this hand-stamped aesthetic, their production operation has been one of the archetypal examples of DIY self-containment in dance music, what Kodwo Eshun has called a 'self-sufficient ecology' (1998: 27). Moritz and Mark ran their own label, wrote almost all of the music they released on it, mastered it at their own in-house mastering studio, and distributed it from their own record shop, Hard Wax. While such operations may in part be construed as an idealised model of commercial autonomy, they were also constructed as a practical response to

the musical context in Berlin during the late 80s and early 90s, when dance records from Detroit and Chicago were generally unavailable in Europe (Walmsley 2010). Through their self-contained 'ecology' of production and distribution, they were able to combine the sale of records they sourced from America, with the distribution of their own productions. In this sense, the canonised legacy of Basic Channel's DIY methods must also be contextualised within their own invocations of perceived authenticities from America, and Detroit in particular, which in itself has been considered by many as an anti-commercial 'byword for high-minded purism' (Matos 2013). Complicating matters further, the flows along this Berlin-Detroit axis must also be viewed bi-directionally, in that American labels such as Underground Resistance made use of Hard Wax's small-scale self-containment as a means to exercise control over the dissemination of their own musical ideologies in Europe (Schaub 2009). Moreover, Mark and Moritz are keen to locate themselves within these broader historical narratives, and in apparent suspicion of the reverence shown towards their own work, they strongly emphasise the need to contextualise it alongside their own influences (Kopf 1996). In this light, the fixity of Basic Channel's own legacy is destabilised, and must be situated within a broader cultural web that allows for multiple, interrelated canons (Shreffler 2011).

So far, I hope to have demonstrated some of the links between b-trak's 'Infinity' and the Basic Channel legacy, as a means both toward defining specific aspects of this legacy, and to gain a more critical understanding of its relationship to contemporary contexts. By deconstructing the surface resemblances between their respective methods of presentation and production, I aim to problematise the underdeveloped understandings of Basic Channel's canonisation that have proliferated among both critics and producers of this music.

Having compared 'Infinity' and 'M-4' as embedded cultural artefacts thus far, I would now like to engage specifically with their sonic relationship. By turning toward the details of the 'music itself', which I argue have often been disregarded during the

⁸ See <http://www.gotwax.de/making-of-gotwax-no-001/>

canonisation process, I hope to add some greater analytical depth to existing discussions of these sonic components, which must be viewed as an integral part of the overall cultural complex (Butler 2006: 12).

Beyond surface and repetition

Although Basic Channel have had diverse impacts on cultural production, their most crucial influence has been in the auditory sphere (see Finalyson 2009, Sonic Fiction 2012). Despite the general acceptance of this fact, the majority of writings on the 'Basic Channel sound' and its subsequent legacies may be characterised by the sorts of limited description that Mark J. Butler has described as 'enhancing impressions gained from listening – producing a kind of head-nodding affirmation in those who know the music, but leaving the uninitiated with only a vague sense of musical particularities' (2006: 9). The following blog quote on Basic Channel's music is a typical example of this:

'The tracks...were termed 'dub-techno', owing to the subtraction of all but the genre's most essential ingredients, which were then reconstructed to merge Jamaican dub, 4/4 bass drum pulses and dissonant synthesisers swallowed by rippling delays and reverb. They restrained techno's energy to untethered pulses and glancing synths that churn and wash below a surface of fog and crackle; 'murky' is a signature adjective.' (Sonic Fiction 2012)

Although this description has an evocative appeal, its exterior focus and heavy use of metaphor is also ambiguous and non-specific. It could be equally applied to either 'M-4' or 'Infinity', not to mention most other tracks that have been influenced by Basic Channel. Of course, a blog post is not necessarily the place for technical analysis, but even within the few academic writings that exist on house and techno, similar sorts of surface musical readings are prevalent. In two very different articles by Philip Sherburne (2004) and Sean Nye (2013), the repetitive, minimalist nature of techno is treated as a definitive, and thus restrictive analytical paradigm. In order to compare 'M-4' and 'Infinity' in a way that will allow for a more critical understanding of Basic Channel's canonic influence, analysis must move beyond these surface aspects.

As embodied by my own record shop experience, preliminary musical comparisons between 'M-4' and 'Infinity' suggest a fairly high level of resemblance. Both tracks occupy the general sonic world of dub-techno, characterised by effect-laden analogue synthesisers, deep, dubby bass lines, four-to-the-floor drum machine rhythms and tempos of around 120-130bpm. More specifically, both of these tracks consist of four timbral elements: two mid-range synthesisers, synthesised bass and a drum machine, which in each case comprises of three percussive sounds: kick drum, hi-hat and clap. Structurally, both tracks are built out of repeated single bar cycles, whereby larger-scale variation comes only from the addition and subtraction of the component elements, as well as from the subtle manipulation of filter-envelopes and equalisation.

Such resemblances resonate with the overriding focus on timbral aspects and structural minimalism that has characterised most writings on Basic Channel's sonic legacy. In this sense, I would argue that the canonisation of the 'Basic Channel sound' has in part been constructed around the standardisation of a superficially understood sonic model. In order to critique this process, analysis must move beyond aspects of surface resemblance and deconstruct fixed paradigms of criticism and musical (re)production. While timbre constitutes a complex and generally under-theorised qualitative category, repetition has received greater musicological attention, and numerous theories already exist through which Basic Channel's minimalism may be more deeply understood. Accordingly, my comparison of the respective minimalisms of

'M-4' and 'Infinity' will look beyond surface similarities to focus on the differences in their internal details.

Robert Fink's writings on minimal music provide a useful theoretical basis for this change of analytical focus. While most theories of minimalism have emphasised its nonteleological nature, Fink deconstructs the essentialised binary of teleological and nonteleological musical forms, instead postulating the subverted concept of 'recombinant teleology'. While traditional Western theories of musical structure have asserted a direct relationship between teleology and large-scale form, recombinant teleologies are detached from formal concerns, such that narratives of tension and release may be fragmented, extended or left unresolved. Thus, in the case of house and techno, a complete tension-release arc may be present within a single rhythmic cell, which will be looped to form a piece that is 'cyclically teleological at every moment but has no *necessary* long-range goal' (2005: 46). By viewing 'M-4' and 'Infinity' through Fink's analytical lens, the specific cyclical cells that comprise each track may be theorised and compared as more than just 'hypnotic rhythm loops' (Kopf 1996).

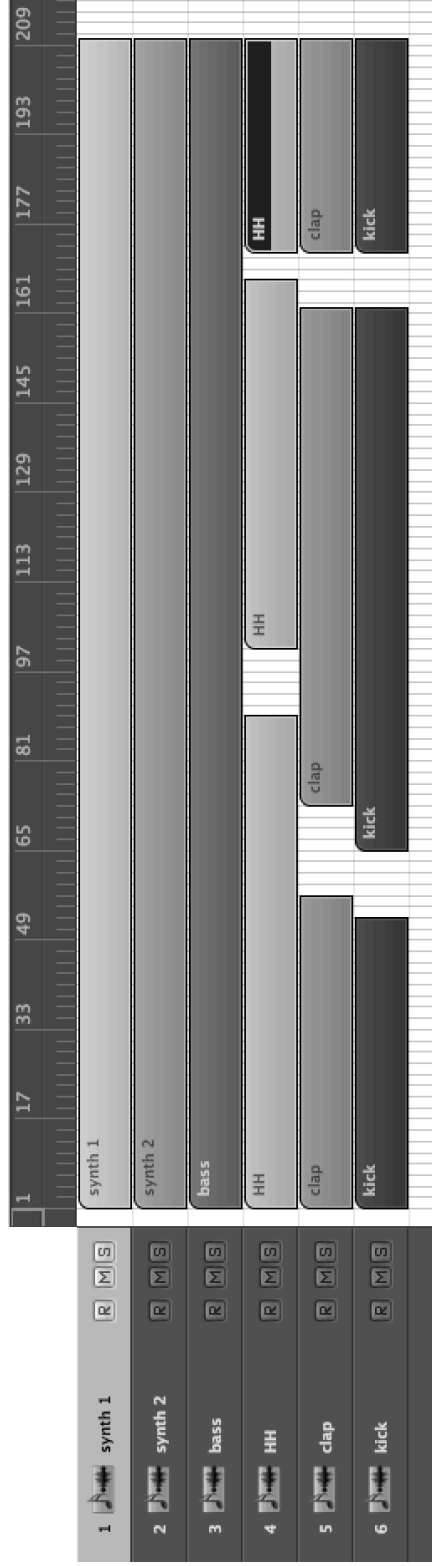
Moreover, I would like to highlight that my interest in Fink's theory relates specifically to clarifying my personal responses to these tracks. In architectural terms, 'M-4' is certainly more repetitive, yet to my mind, 'Infinity' somehow seems more repetitive – lacking much sense of forward-motion. The greater structural variation in 'Infinity' is evident in my structural diagrams, which represent the presence and absence of each textural component throughout the course of each track (See Ex. 3 and Ex. 3.1). This contradictory relationship between perceived and actual repetitiveness suggests that dynamism and motion – important factors in what is after all dance music – must be located within the musical details, which thus far have generally been ignored in writings on Basic Channel.

Rhythmic and metrical interplay constitutes a primary element of Basic Channel's sound, and one that has received little attention. The entirety of 'M-4' is based on a single repeated figure, (see Ex 4.1) but the polymetric interaction of its component rhythmic cells enriches an otherwise static repetitive structure. Various levels of half and double-time metre are simultaneously implied, without any real sense of resolution to one metre in particular. While the drum pattern is a two beat phrase, synth 2 and the bass line cross over this with their interlinked four beat phrase. A semiquaver metre is added by synth 1, which although appearing to be another two beat phrase, is affected by an oscillating filter envelope (see the curve on Ex. 4.1) that means it is better thought of as a two-bar phrase. Though the movement of this filter follows a regular 2 bar pattern, its non-linear, curved oscillation, gives a powerful but ultimately unfulfilled feeling that the synth line might actually 'go somewhere else'. The interplay of these various metrical elements provides a greater depth to the rhythmic whole, as well as a means upon which the listener may constantly (both consciously and subconsciously) alter and recontextualise the way they that they perceive the music.⁹

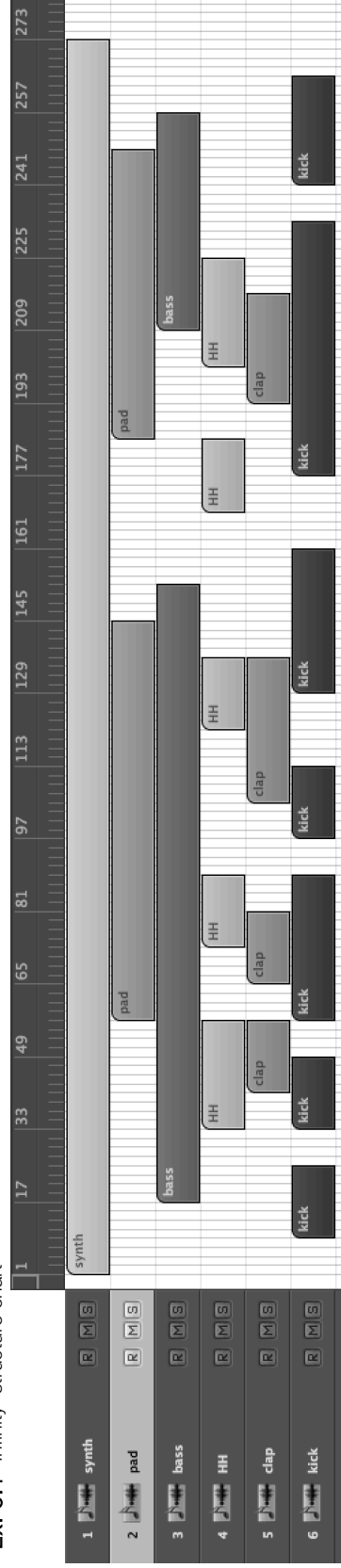
In 'Infinity' (see Ex 4), certain aspects of this metrical ambiguity may be found, but with some important differences. While there is some similar interplay between half and double time metres, the rhythmic cells are very even, providing little sense of any tension against the pervasive four-to-the-floor kick drum. Conversely, 'M-4' contains subtle elements of syncopation that create a sense of forward motion through small-scale rhythmic teleologies. Most obviously, synth 1 constantly oscillates between off-beats and resolutions on to beats two and four – in themselves the weaker

⁹ Richard Middleton's (2000) theories of gesture could provide another means to conceptualise these different metrical layers.

Ex. 3 'M-4' structure chart



Ex. 3.1 'Infinity' structure chart



crotchet pulses. Similarly, synth 2 involves an embellished 3-3-2 rhythm, in itself another asymmetrical rhythmic cycle that fluctuates teleologically from strong to weak beats.

Through the consideration of such rhythmic and metric subtleties, we can begin to form a more nuanced conception of Basic Channel's sonic legacy of minimalism, one that seeks to explain how and why their repetitive structures functioned. By contrasting the micro-level uses of rhythm in both 'M-4' and 'Infinity', we can propose some ideas as to why 'M-4' 'works' aesthetically, despite having such a repetitive structure.¹⁰

In this sense, where Basic Channel's minimalism has solely been understood as a non-teleological surface process, the standardisation and canonisation of this aesthetic has glossed over the teleological details that are at play within its internal structure. Moreover, ignoring these details serves to neglect some of the more traditional musical devices that are perhaps key to the success of this music, and thus in part towards its critical acclaim. Of course, my focus here on rhythm and metre should not detract from the more readily apparent, and perhaps more unique aspects of Basic Channel's musical legacy. However, by choosing to address this generally unnoticed feature of their music, I hope to have demonstrated the importance of a broader analytical approach, such that the norms of criticism and creative practice involved in the processes of canon formation and reproduction may be subject to necessary critique.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through a close comparison of Maurizio's 'M-4' and b-trak's 'Infinity', I aim to have formulated the beginnings of a more critical approach through which Basic Channel's canonic position in dance music culture may be understood. By analysing respective resemblances and differences, and situating this comparison within the context of journalistic contributions to Basic Channel's legacy, I aim to have highlighted the contradictions, complexities and simplifications that have often defined much of this process of canonisation. I have deconstructed what I suggest are superficial understandings of Basic Channel's perceived cultural and sonic legacies, as part of the formation and perpetuation of this canon through the interrelated activities of both critics and producers. Through this process of deconstruction, I hope to have destabilised their legacy such that it may become a more nuanced site for future criticism and musical creativity.

While my subjective emphasis on only these two tracks serves in some ways to limit possibilities for wider-reaching theoretical conclusions, I would also like to view this specific focus as a case study indicative of more far-reaching issues. Beyond the subject of Basic Channel's legacy, I would also like my analytical methods to function as a way of developing approaches to the discussion and production of dance music more generally. Although the music I have discussed largely exists outside many of the sorts of power structures we may traditionally associate with more commercial musics, I would still argue for the importance of a rigorously critical approach, such that canonisation and related cultural processes may constantly be contested and redefined. Though my own methods have been from an academic perspective, I do not see the primary goal of this study as a scholarly appropriation of house and techno culture. Rather, I would like to hope that such critical approaches may also be applied outside of academic contexts, and be of use to those sites of criticism and musical

¹⁰ These ideas resonate with John Miller Chernoff's studies of Ghanaian drumming, in which he argues that although the power of the music may be clarified and magnified by repetition, such enhancement is wholly reliant on the existent strength and interest of the base material (1979: 112).

production that are perhaps more relevant to house and techno's day to day cultural development.

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