Chapter 12
Catalogue Æsthetics: Database in and as Music

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ABSTRACT
The technological breakthroughs of the previous century caused a series of profound cultural shifts, which led to the digitalization of developed societies. Accordingly, the listening paradigm of the 21st century is no longer that of being passively exposed to music. Instead, contemporary audiences are typically expected to dynamically traverse collections of (big) data and, synthesize, rather than just access, musical content, employing several overlapping interfaces. In a similar fashion, the compositional schemata of the past have been shifted to account for the predominant symbolic form of our times, i.e. the Database. In that vein, several approaches to database (driven) music are scrutinized in this chapter, both in historical retrospective, as well as with respect to contemporary compositional practices.

INTRODUCTION
The unruly digitization of developed societies during the 20th century has caused a major overturn in the very foundations of our culture. For the first time in recent human history, contemporary media seem to de-emphasize narratives in favor of paradigmatic dimensions. Accordingly, the established symbolic forms and (re)presentational schemata of the past have been dramatically refashioned and/or succumbed to entirely new, or to previously subsidiary, ones. This way, and following the inception of data as the flag of the entire informational revolution, database came to be the predominant symbolic form of our times. In their various contingencies, databases currently constitute the backbone of most human activities. On their turn, contemporary societies seem to prioritize data over those processes/interfaces meant to instantiate them—the latter being interchangeable, contingent, situation-specific, and, in certain cases, even unintentional or subsidiary.

The aftershock of such a condition to the music world has been tremendous; entirely new ways of listening, composing, distributing and thinking about music have been laid out. The predominant music media of our times seem to privilege a paradigmatic listening attitude—consider iPod, iTunes, YouTube,
SoundCloud, Spotify, or the various P2P file-sharing networks, for instance. Music distribution has moved, for its greatest part, to the ‘cloud’—i.e. a series of internet-based computer resources which store/manage/process data, so that they may be delivered to users in the form of utility—which advertises itself as the placeholder of all music that has been, or that will ever be, produced. Contemporary listeners can no longer be thought of as passive receivers; they rather maneuver through enormous music libraries on their own discretion, acquiring significant control on what/how/when they would listen to. In a nutshell, the contemporary listening paradigm is to dynamically traverse/perform (big) data.

The musical forms of the past—albeit still topical—are not in tandem with such a database-centric logic; they rather abide a primarily narrative-driven tradition and, hence, they condition second-fiddle listening attitudes which are likely to become exceptional, if not obsolete, in the near future. Existent compositional schemata are already being transfigured in various ways, from composers and listeners alike, so that they comply with present-day symbolic forms and means of distribution. To map the new compositional landscape and to explore the ways in which historical, traditional and contemporary variables are intertwined to produce it, remains an open and ongoing concern. It may be safely assumed, nevertheless, that database-centric music paradigms, in their various eventualities, best demonstrate how contemporary culture and music practice entwine and creatively affirm each other. Yet, the extent to which they have been laid out, as well as their exact functions and their particular characteristics, are still to be scrutinized. This chapter is an attempt towards such a direction. In particular, it is herein intended to:

1. Elaborate upon the 21st century listening paradigm and to demonstrate the ways in which it suggests new music forms and new compositional schemata.
2. Discuss the most important approaches to ‘paradigmatic composition’ in their various eventualities.
3. Elaborate on the ways database may be constituted and may function as a valid musical form.
4. Present a series of historical (precursor) as well as of contemporary examples of database (driven) music.
5. Touch the æsthetic implications of the above.

In simpler words, it is herein intended to examine the ways in which the predominant symbolic form of our times—i.e. the database—suggests new compositional and morphological traits, and to present relevant music examples—both in a historical retrospective and with respect to contemporary practice.

**Background**

The technological breakthroughs of the previous century, especially during and following the Second World War, accounted for an entire new kind of globally distributed culture which has been largely information-led, telecommunication-based and service-oriented (Lyotard, 1984; Nora & Minc, 1981; Bell, 2008). This eventually led to the computerization of developed societies, to the extent that Hayles (2008) has already envisaged a post-human condition, where humans are co-produced with intelligent machines, where information is privileged over matter, and where consciousness is understood as merely an epiphenomenon. The introduction of all sorts of new (computer-specific) media has profoundly altered most, if not all, aspects of human existence—art included. This is epitomized in the rise and the rapid standardization of the so-called media studies (McDougall, 2012, pp. 2-4), as well as in the emergence of (new) media art (Rush, 2005). And while it has been, rightly, argued that new kinds of media in art do