

Music generative AI and ‘The Hegelian Wound’

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Introduction

Since late-2023, digital audio workstations (DAWs) have increasingly introduced AI tools amongst the features (or ‘plugins’) they provide to music producers to create and edit their music and audio. Throughout the history of music production, particularly digital music production, musicians have embraced new tools and technologies as a means of innovating their aesthetic outputs and for enhancing or automating their workflows. New tools often lead to the creation of new sub-genres or music cultures centred around sounds that were previously not imaginable before. Despite the long tradition of optimism and appreciation (by most producers) towards new production tools, before these AI tools hit the music production mainstream, reactions and the discourse amongst producers to the future prospect of AI tools for production varied more drastically. Now with the recent emergence of music generative AI platforms that redefine the production process completely, the appreciation of new tools has begun to morph into anxieties towards new automation that diminishes creativity. Who would have guessed that control over the artistic process matters as much to the artists as their art itself?

With the help and use of my own tacit knowledge of the current digital music production culture and industry, particularly in the genres of Hip Hop, Pop, and RnB, in this piece I highlight the rise of music generative AI platforms and why producers have not embraced these with glee. I follow this by proposing why embracing the Hegelian concept of ‘Die Wunde’ (The Wound) may be the best way forward for human producers to keep their sounds innovative and their role necessary. I don’t argue here as a neo-luddite, ‘decelerationist’ or conversely a techno-optimist or accelerationist. Rather, it seems evident to me that neither producers, nor music listeners and fans have presented a realist vision for the future of music as we currently enjoy it with regards to the introduction of AI music generation platforms. I write pre-dominantly with musicians and music academics in mind to argue why applying Hegel to analysis of our AI predicament is key.

Let me illustrate, through popular examples of producer sentiment towards AI in the recent past, where confusion about its real-world potential, usage, and accessibility can be easily demonstrated. In an interview with popular producer-culture podcast *ProducerGrind*, Grammy-winning producer Timbaland, whose career and use of music technology spans three decades, expressed his belief that when AI tools will be used *in partnership with industry producers* within their DAWs “the AI [will be able to] pump out thousands of dope beats” (2022). Timbaland emphasized that AI tools could help top producers enhance their competitive edge over industry rivals, implying that human skill remains fundamental to the final creative outcome. In a Q&A on the same topic, multi-platinum producer and rapper Russ took a different perspective, arguing that whilst “producers will use AI to enhance their beats”, the ease at which current DAWs already allow human producers to create these beats makes the creative process within the software vulnerable to full automation (2023). However, commercially available machine learning models today have not been trained to replicate the human patterns of creativity for full song production within DAWs as Russ predicted, nor have the available AI tools within DAWs shown capabilities of partnering with human producers to “pump out thousands of beats” at the industry redefining level as suggested by Timbaland.

Instead, AI music generation model platforms have emerged that do away with the use of the DAW completely. This is not hyperbolic sentiment either. In August 2024, the AI-generated track “Verknallt in einen Talahon” reached No. 48 in the German charts, and peaked

at No. 3 on Spotify's global viral chart (Oltermann and Cole, 2024). The lyrics were written by a human, but the audio was generated by the AI music generation platform Udio. The average listener will likely not be able to tell that the singer on the track is more 'alien' than 'human', and certainly will not be able to tell that the instrumental (or beat) was created through machine learning rather than by a human producer. The question thus remains as to how human music producers will adapt to this new technology.

Music generative platforms and the role of producers

Amongst music producers with large-scale industry success, to upcoming producers building their musical catalogues, to novice producers who aspire to one day "make it" through the success and recognition of their music production talent and craftsmanship, the emergence of AI music generation platforms such as Udio and Suno (both of which are currently facing legal action from large labels including Sony, Warner, and Universal) have led to fears and frustration about the future of music production as a vocation and as a medium through which one can express emotion and cultural knowledge.

Producers know that we can still create as we like, but the 'game' and financial 'hustle' of music production also matter as integral parts of the reasons we produce. Across social media, producers are expressing their worries about losing the ability to live and thrive off their skills in creating instrumentals for artists, as such AI platforms increasingly show signs of being able to replicate this work. As the usage, availability, and performance of music generation AI platforms and software increases, it seems imperative that humans will still remain with the desire to listen to the voices and lyrics of human artists. Nonetheless, what is currently overlooked in our time is the potential impact of the production 'side' of popular tracks being increasingly 'created' by machine, in turn eliminating the need for large numbers of producers from the music business. Speaking to the listener *through* the sounds of their instrumental and arrangement, the human creative behind the beat of a popular song is familiar with the feeling and knowledge of not being known to a great extent by the casual listener – yet AI threatens their position here completely.

As the platforms currently stand, music generation AI raises concerns that artists may reassign the producer's role to themselves, at least to the extent that they can input their desired musical ideas into a prompt box through the medium of language. I won't make judgements about the aesthetic outcomes of this possible future, but producers respect their artistry enough and have been quite vocal about how this would be less than ideal. For hobbyist music producers who make music purely for fun, this scenario does not matter. However, for those who have built careers and 'signature sounds' across years of practice and networking in the music industry (and especially for those who produce purely instrumental music such as for commercials and background music), AI comes as a wound which must be faced. We need Hegel to suggest how we may do so.

Dealing with The Wound

Predictions that these platforms could get better has created the belief that the edge of the cliff is near and that the posthuman era of music is finally arriving. Producers instinctively know that the continuation of the music generation AI improvement trend could lead to the mass transfer of wealth to the technology owners and away from the creatives – the rise of streaming services and its impact on creatives is an example of this that has not been forgotten. The backlash to the rising popularity of these websites comes as no surprise, and salt has further been rubbed into the wound with reports by The Telegraph that "the [UK] government is reportedly preparing to allow AI companies to take what they want, without compensation".

Of course we must push for regulation against Big Tech, but this is clearly already going to be an uphill battle. Increasingly, this is where we creatives need philosophy to help us strategize for the future of our existence.

The cultural and commercial functions of DAW production have suffered a metaphysical wound. Unlike with the introduction and use of other tools and technologies for music production, producers will now have to begin rethinking how they use their skills and their relationships to the artists they work with – and this is not a bad thing. Hegel is a helpful philosopher for analysing the arising problems of the post-human era of generative AI because “his message is not “the spirit of trust” [...] but rather the spirit of distrust – his premise is that every large human project goes wrong and only in this way attests to its truth” (Žižek, 2020).

In his book *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (2015), Slavoj Žižek highlights Hegel’s use of the term ‘Die Wunde’ as a description for when destructive changes in societal conditions themselves create the space for new epochs to arise which embrace the destructive change as their foundation. Žižek draws upon Hegel’s point in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) that “the Spirit is itself the wound it tries to heal, that is the, the wound is self-inflicted” and expands on this concept which he names “The Hegelian Wound”. The Hegelian Wound means, in simplified terms articulated by Žižek himself, “in the dialectical process, a shift of perspective occurs which makes the wound itself appear as its opposite – the wound itself is its own healing when seen from another standpoint” (2015). We must now look our wound from another standpoint to see how it is its own ‘healing’ for music producers and for lovers of music.

Applying this notion to the introduction of music generative AI, ‘the wound’ is the destructive potential of these AI platforms to producers and the industry of music production. It is a wound because producers cannot imagine that these platforms will cease to exist (or if labels will just buy them). We must ask then; how can these wounds (AI platforms) also be ‘[their] own healing’? What will be the shift in perspective of music producers towards this wound? It seems likely, at this early stage, that being ‘outcompeted’ by these music generating algorithms will force producers to rethink their creative workflows entirely and require them to innovate sonically in ways in which the models have yet to learn from. This is not the outcome most musicians wanted from AI, but (brutally) this trajectory looks increasingly plausible.

When all new the music begins to sound the same, created at a much more rapid rate than humans are currently doing, the situation opens in which producers are forced to reinvent their crafts and forced to be even more creative. Thanks to music generative AI, the job of the producer will require much more originality than the current repetitive and often mechanical process of creation behind much of today’s popular contemporary music – particularly since this is where the AI will thrive.

Through this struggle to create something original, and human, I believe we can expect music producers to bring about a new era of creativity and new forms and genres of music. The age-old belief that “the music of today sucks” could be challenged when we view music generative AI as a driving force for humans to play around with their DAWs again, focusing on quality and originality, rather than for assisting us with “pumping out thousands of beats”.

Looking at this wound over a longer time frame, music generative AI platforms could flood streaming platforms with good music over the next few years and decades, but we may also see a blossoming renaissance of great music by truly great human music producers who adapt quickly to this new situation. The AI platforms themselves will become mental ‘tools’ which remind all DAW producers that experimentation is fundamental to art, and that instead of always trying to enhance or smoothen our musical workflows through new technologies, it is time we use new technology to allow us the space to make sound in an unmechanical way.

The ‘culture industry’ will destroy itself and it is our task to reinvent new culture. Whether music consumers listen to our music, or the music made by machines will be up to them (somewhat!), we producers must now adamantly make sure our creative processes remain *unprocessed*!

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