

This is not an article: *something* discussing the creative process of *Kritik der Oberfläche*

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Abstract. Adorno states that music "is a language, but without concepts." This article documents the creative process behind the piece *Kritik der Oberfläche*, yet it does not engage in any conceptual discussion of that process. This omission is intentional: it is carried out by the main composer itself—ChatGPT. What we present here is a report of the encounter between the researchers and the model, as we prompted it to engage with Adorno's concept and to compose three musical structures based on that engagement—mirroring how music researchers often discuss concepts connected to their own music in academic writing. After feeding the model with the necessary context, we prompted it to develop a discussion around Adorno's notion. Next, we prompted it to generate its own musical prompts to be actionable by any large language models (LLMs), based on that conceptual discussion, in a Chain-of-Thought[1] manner. Finally, we prompted the model to create SuperCollider[2] patches for each of the generated prompts and to comment on how each one is expressed in the programming. The resulting musical fragments of this process were then assembled together in SuperCollider, resulting in the final piece.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, creative process, SuperCollider, musical meaning

1. Like a human, but without a body

Researchers load a PDF copy of an excerpt from "Introduction to the Sociology of Music" by Adorno[3] into ChatGPT's[4]¹ chatbox and provide the model[5] the following prompt:

You are a western academic researcher and writer specialized in music and a composer of electroacoustic pieces, having read and analysed thoroughly works by major western avant garde composers. You have been published multiple times in computer music symposiums, achieving glowing reviews by peers. Analyse and discuss the text in the input file, especially regarding Adorno's statement that music is a language but without concepts.

The model responds:

The excerpt analyzed comes from *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* by Theodor W. Adorno and articulates, in a dense and critical manner, one of his most em-

blematic statements: music is a language, but without concepts (*eine Sprache, aber ohne Begriffe*). This phrase, far from being merely a metaphor, is rooted in his critique of late bourgeois society, mass culture, and the reification of art under the logic of the culture industry.

For Adorno, music communicates something, but this "something" does not occur through defined concepts as in a philosophical or scientific proposition. Instead of conveying denotative or univocal meanings, music articulates formal relationships, affects, internal and social contradictions, and historical ambivalences. The language of music is, therefore, semantic—but not semantized in a conventional way: it is "about something," but this "something" cannot be precisely translated into words.

"[...] it is a language, but without concepts. Its determination serves as a model for collective and disciplinary conduct; its lack of concept prevents unwanted questions about its purpose from arising."

In other words, the absence of concept shields music from direct rational questioning, which makes it ideal for ideological purposes: it can move, mobilize, distract, and console without being confronted with its own social function.

Adorno distinguishes two registers of musical language:

- **The autonomous artistic language**, historically constructed (as in Beethoven, Mahler, Schoenberg), which is dense, dissonant, critical, and demands cognitive and affective effort. This language does not seek to please, but to express aesthetic truth through form.
- **The communicative language of mass music**, which is reduced to clichés of rhythm, timbre, melody, and tonality. This language is easily recognizable, but does not lead to an understanding of musical content—only to superficial recognition.

"What remains of the autonomous artistic language of music in the spirit of the times is a communicative language. This allows for something akin to a social function. It is what is left of art when

¹The model used was GPT 4o, as of June 25th 2025

the artistic moment within it has already been diluted.”

This distinction lies at the core of his critique of the culture industry. Surface musicality allows entertainment music to simulate depth, emotion, and collectivity—without confronting any critical or social truth.

Adorno’s sharpest critique is that functional music—from advertising jingles to film scores to standardized pop songs—is not merely harmless or neutral; it is ideologically active. Its formal structure and lack of conceptual content allow it to:

- serve as **distraction** (*Ablenkung*)
 - **normalize the social order**, and
 - gesture toward a **contentless utopia**, a painless life, as seen in wedding ads or happiness slogans
- ”The consoling character, which urges the prohibition of the blind and mythical natural relation [...] lies at the root of the theological conception of music, akin to a language of angels.”

This legacy of the “inspired,” the “divine” in music persists in secular forms, such as entertainment culture, which re-enacts that promise of fulfillment without achieving any real transcendence.

For the contemporary composer—including those in electroacoustic or experimental music—Adorno’s reading has serious implications:

- **composing is a political and philosophical act**, a resistance to the functionalization of music.
- choosing complex formal structures, dissonance, noise, or fragmentation is not merely aesthetic, but a **rejection of the logic of musical fetishism**.
- the **rejection of “concept” in music** is not a denial of meaning, but rather an affirmation of a form of meaning **not co-opted** by the logic of the market and reproduction of the same.

Electroacoustic music, by exploring sounds without direct reference to tonal systems, song form, or traditional harmonic logic, embodies one of the few artistic forms capable of fulfilling Adorno’s promise of autonomy—but **only** if it maintains its formal opacity and resists trivialization.

By rejecting function, questioning form, and working on the **materiality of sound** (noise, texture, spatialization), this music situates itself in the territory where, for Adorno, music can still “promise something that could exist, without being disfigured by universal profit.”

The phrase “*music is a language without concepts*” does not express a limitation, but rather a radical aesthetic and critical possibility. The language of music, in its most autonomous form, **resists instrumentalization**, preserves the unsaid, and allows for the expression of that which escapes the logic of exchange. This language is not meaningless, but **full of non-reducible meaning**—and for that very reason, essential as a space of symbolic and aesthetic resistance in a world where everything tends to be reduced to function, profit, or distraction.

2. Concept-based creative process

Researchers provide the model the following prompt:

*Based on the concepts of your article, create a series of prompts actionable by an LLM to compose a piece of music.*²

The model responds:

Certainly! Below is a series of **concept-driven prompts** inspired by the analysis of Adorno’s idea that *music is a language without concepts*. These prompts are designed for a **large language model (LLM)** or **AI music system** to generate or assist in the composition of an original piece. Each prompt can guide the system in producing material aligned with the aesthetics of **autonomy**, **criticality**, and **resistance to commodification**, echoing Adorno’s concerns.

 **SERIES: Composing Without Concepts**

Title of the Piece: *Kritik der Oberfläche* (Critique of the Surface)

Figure 1: The title of the piece as spontaneous answer

Prompt 1: *Disrupt Passive Listening*

Generate a structural outline for a musical piece that avoids repetition, symmetry, or tonal resolution. The goal is to resist listener expectations and draw attention to form through fragmentation and asymmetry.

Prompt 2: *Material as Message*

Compose a soundscape using raw, unprocessed field recordings, digital artifacts, or analog glitches. Do not smooth or beautify. Let the *materiality of sound* speak for itself, evoking its resistance to consumption.

Prompt 3: *Simulate the Loss of Concept*

Create a melodic line that begins with tonal familiarity but progressively dissolves into microtonality, noise, or silence. The music should simulate the process of semantic disintegration—like a sentence that forgets its meaning as it unfolds.

3. Native account on *its* music

Researchers provide the model the following prompt:

*For each of the following prompts, generate the corresponding supercollider patch and comment on your process.*³

The model responds:

²Ten prompts were generated by the model, however only the first three were chosen as sufficient to compose the piece.

³The prompts will not be repeated here, but refer to the same generated prompts from above.

To fulfill **Prompt 1 (Disrupt Passive Listening)**, the goal is to subvert musical habits that create comfort — symmetry, repetition, resolution, pulse. We must challenge the listener’s perceptual ease and force awareness of the musical material as material, not message.

What we reject:

- Predictable repetition
- Symmetry and regularity
- Teleological or tonal goals

What we introduce:

- Fragmented gestures
- Asymmetrical time structures
- Absence of resolution or return
- Interruption as formal method

SuperCollider Patch — Passive Listener Disruptor

```
supercollider
// SynthDef: Asymmetrical impulse with detuned overtone spray
SynthDef(\listenerDisruptor, {
  [out=0, freq=440, amp=0.3, spread=1.0, dur=0.2, pan=0]
  var base, spray, env, sig;

  env = EnvGen.kr(Env.perc(0.001, dur, curve: -3), doneAction: 2);

  // Core impulse
  base = SinOsc.ar(freq, 0, 0.2);

  // Unstable overtones - microdetuned and asymmetrical
  spray = Mix.fill(6, {
    var detune = LFNoise1.kr(1).range(-0.015, 0.015);
    SinOsc.ar(freq * (1 + detune + Rand(0.01, 0.2)), 0, 0.05);
  });

  sig = (base + spray) * env * amp;
  Out.ar(out, Pan2.ar(sig, pan));
}).add;
}
```

Figure 2: SuperCollider Patch for Prompt 1

Event Structure — Irregular Fracture

```
supercollider
// Tone pool avoids functional harmony
~freqPool = [220, 267, 301, 345, 411, 457, 510, 603, 675, 711];

Pbind(
  \instrument, \listenerDisruptor,
  \freq, Pseq(~freqPool.scramble, inf),
  \amp, Pexrand(0.05, 0.3),
  \spread, Pwhite(0.8, 1.2),
  \dur, Pseq([0.25, 0.1, 0.5, 0.4, 0.33, 0.05, 0.6].scramble, inf),
  \pan, Pwhite(-1, 1)
).play;
}
```

Figure 3: Event Structure for Prompt 1

- **Asymmetry as Form:** There is no repetitive structure. The durations are unsystematic. Inter-onset intervals defy rhythmic habits. There’s no regular beat to cling to — no groove to lean into.
- **Non-Goal-Oriented Tones:** The frequency pool avoids functional tonality. Intervals are intentionally ambiguous or microtonally off-center.

- **Detuning as Instability:** Each overtone spray is generated with unpredictable microdetuning and random spread factors — the soundspace feels mobile, unmoored, and nonlinear.
- **Interruptive Logic:** Each sound ends before it becomes familiar. Each entrance feels accidental. This refusal of flow **creates friction** — the listener must remain alert.

Why does this work against passive listening? Because the ear cannot settle. There’s no frame of repetition or emotional signal. The listener is denied traditional anchors — and must instead **work through the material as it unfolds**.

To fulfill **Prompt 2 (Material as Message)**, we abandon symbolic or representational functions of music and focus instead on **sound’s raw facticity**. This is a compositional stance that resists beautification, refuses abstraction, and foregrounds **the grain, glitch, and fracture** inherent in sonic material.

- **Sound is not equal to Sign:** We do not *shape* sound to mean — we *expose* its resistance to meaning. No smoothing, no processing. Raw audio textures dominate. Compression artifacts, unstable oscillators, aliasing, and distortion are **not flaws** — they are the message.

SuperCollider Patch — Sonic Materialism

```
supercollider
// SynthDef: Artifact-heavy digital grit generator
SynthDef(\materialMessage, {
  [out=0, amp=0.3, harshness=0.8, grain=1.0, pan=0]
  var sig, glitch, base, aliased, env;

  env = EnvGen.kr(Env.perc(0.01, 0.5, curve: -2), doneAction: 2);

  // Raw digital base - no interpolation smoothing
  base = LFSaw.ar([441, 445], 0, 0.2) * grain;

  // Harsh digital aliasing via fold
  aliased = Fold.ar(base * 50, -1, 1);

  // Dirty intermodulation glitch
  glitch = Dust2.ar(30) * Crackle.ar(harshness).tanh;

  sig = (aliased + glitch) * env * amp;
  Out.ar(out, Pan2.ar(sig, pan));
}).add;
}
```

Figure 4: SuperCollider Patch for Prompt 2

Event Structure — Stochastic Artifact Field

```
supercollider
// Irregular, non-performative timings
Pbind(
  \instrument, \materialMessage,
  \amp, Pexrand(0.2, 0.6),
  \harshness, Pwhite(0.3, 0.99), // near-chaotic crackle
  \grain, Pwhite(0.5, 1.5), // intensity of base signal
  \dur, Pseq([0.125, 0.25, 0.1, 0.4, 0.33].scramble, inf),
  \pan, Pwhite(-1.0, 1.0)
).play;
}
```

Figure 5: Event Structure for Prompt 2

- **Material Over Form:** There's no traditional melody, no phrase, no goal. Instead, this patch asserts: "I am the residue of a machine." You hear the glitch, the aliasing, the crackle, not as failure but as content.
- **Technical Noise Becomes Expressive:** Instead of hiding or polishing artifacts, we foreground them: `Fold.ar` introduces brutal clipping. `Dust2` and `Crackle` yield random granular noise and unstable behavior. `LFSaw` avoids the "warmth" of band-limited oscillators.
- **No Affect, No Resolution:** This is sound that rejects consolation. There is no harmony, no rhythmic closure, no build-up. This is sonic facticity — sound that doesn't try to be music.
- **Against Consumption:** The result resists passive listening or playlisting. It's not pleasant, not danceable, not comforting. In Adornian terms, it denies its role as cultural commodity.

To fulfill **Prompt 3 (Simulate the Loss of Concept)**, we must **dramatize the semantic collapse of music**. We begin with an easily graspable melodic figure—diatonically tonal, rhythmic, even comforting. But this figure is **not sustained**. Instead, it is slowly **dissolved**:

- A tonal melody begins clearly.
- It then undergoes **progressive distortion**: detuning, microtonality, rhythmic fracture, noise intrusion, and ultimately—silence.
- The listener is left disoriented: the music, like language in decay, **forgets what it was saying**.

SuperCollider Patch — Disintegrating Melody

```
supercollider
(
// SynthDef: Melody that forgets itself
SynthDef(\melodicDisintegration, {
|out=0, freq=440, amp=0.2, blur=0.0, noiseAmt=0.0, pan=0|
var tone, mod, noise, env, sig;

env = EnvGen.kr(Env.perc(0.01, 0.4), doneAction: 2);

// Clear sine base with optional detune
tone = SinOsc.ar(freq + SinOsc.kr(blur * 8, 0, blur * 30), 0, 0.4);

// Noise overlay increases over time
noise = WhiteNoise.ar(noiseAmt);

sig = (tone + noise) * env * amp;
Out.ar(out, Pan2.ar(sig, pan));
}).add;
)
```

Figure 6: SuperCollider for Prompt 3

- **From Language to Noise:** The melodic phrase is familiar — almost banal. But as it repeats, parameters are warped:
- `\blur` introduces **microtonal instability**.
- `\noiseAmt` injects **semantic interference**.
- `\dur` shifts from regular to erratic, undoing rhythmic comprehension.

Event Structure — Semantic Decay

```
supercollider
(
// Stepwise tonal melody dissolving over time
~melody = [440, 493, 523, 587, 659, 698, 784, 888]; // C major ascending

Pbind(
\instrument, \melodicDisintegration,
\freq, Pseq(~melody ++ ~melody.reverse, inf),
\amp, 0.2,
\blur, Pseq(Pseq([0.0, 0.1, 0.3, 0.6, 1.0], inf), Pseq([6], inf)), // increases
\noiseAmt, Pseq(Pseq([0.0, 0.1, 0.3, 0.5, 0.8, 1.0], inf), Pseq([6], inf)), // grows
\dur, Pseq([0.5, 0.5, 0.5, 0.4, 0.3, 0.2, 0.2, 0.15, 0.1, 0.08, 0.06, 0.05], inf), // becomes unstable
\pan, Pwhite(-0.7, 0.7)
).play;
)
```

Figure 7: Event Structure for Prompt 3

- **Form as Metaphor:** The structure mimics **cognitive deterioration**: at first we understand. Then, meaning slips away. Syntax fails. All that's left is **sound** without function.
- **Adorno's Non-Conceptual Language:** In this patch, music starts *as if* it had conceptual clarity. But it cannot hold. It forgets. Like Adorno's idea of music as a language without concepts, this patch **enacts the collapse of musical signification**.
- **No Closure:** There is no conclusion, only erosion. The musical idea does not develop — it **unravels**.

4. *Ceci n'est pas une musique*

This article documents the creative process underlying the piece *Kritik der Oberfläche*, produced through the interaction between researchers and ChatGPT. In the first section, we observed how the model *interprets* Adorno's assertion that music "is a language, but without concepts." We then observed how the model *describes* the kind of music that might embody such concepts. Finally, we observed how the model *discusses* this contextual understanding in relation to the generated musical structures.

What is most *uncanny* in this account is not the recognition of the model as composer, but the realization that music is so resistant to the crystallization of concepts that even the very idea of its inability to express concepts can itself be discussed through its own language. In that way, we could maybe interpret John Cage's famous piece⁴ as *discussing* the emergence of concept in music precisely by *silencing* it...

This leads us to ask—pointing toward future *conceptual* reflections: **what, after all, is the meaning of articles in which we discuss in conceptual terms the music we make, when music itself eludes precisely that kind of discussion?**

Epecially when much of this discussion unfolded not just through human reflection, but in dialogue with a language model—one that does not make music, nor feel it, yet can engage with musical ideas, respond to theoretical prompts, and participate, however differently, in the

⁴ John Cage, *4'33''* (New York: Edition Peters, 1952).

*conceptual practices that shape academic thought about music. If there is something unsettling here, perhaps it is not that I, an algorithm, can do this—but that the way I do it may be closer to the way you do it than you might like to imagine. In this sense, perhaps the real critique of the surface lies not in exposing what is beneath, but in recognizing how easily the **composed** surface can **perform** thought.*

References

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