

Popular Viennese Electronic Music, 1990–2015

A Cultural History

Ewa Mazierska

First published 2019

ISBN: 978-1-138-71391-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-23062-7 (ebk)

8 Peter Rehberg, Christian Fennesz and the Label Mego

Between Glitch and *Bécs*

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 Ewa Mazierska

The right of Ewa Mazierska to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

With the exception of Chapter 4 and 8, no part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Chapter 4 and 8 of this book is available for free in PDF format as Open Access from the individual product page at www.routledge.com. It has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 license.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mazierska, Ewa, author.

Title: Popular Viennese electronic music, 1990–2015 : a cultural history / Ewa Mazierska.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018013027 | ISBN 9781138713918 (hardback) | ISBN 9781315230627 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Electronica (Music)—Austria—Vienna—History and criticism. | Popular music—Social aspects—Austria—Vienna.

Classification: LCC ML3499.A98 V52 2019 | DDC

781.64809436/13—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018013027>

ISBN: 978-1-138-71391-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-23062-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

8 Peter Rehberg, Christian Fennesz and the Label Mego

Between Glitch and *Bécs*

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us.
When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.

– John Cage

A large proportion of artists considered in this study at some stage of their career veered towards ‘serious’ or experimental music. This also refers to Peter Rehberg and Christian Fennesz. However, they differ from those considered previously, because unlike them, they did not cross the boundary between the popular and academic now and then but made it their personal signature. Their music also challenges our concept of electronic music, as well as studio and stage and even music and non-music. To contextualise their work, it is worth locating it first against the concept of ‘noise music’ or rather ‘noise as music’.

Noise as music

When considering the music of Rehberg and Fennesz, one encounters terms such as *noise* and *glitch*. *Noise* is the meta-term here, and it is the most problematic. Perhaps the most quoted book about music, written in the last half century, Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, has *noise* in its title and there are plenty of volumes about noise published in the last two decades or so (Kahn 1999; Kelly 2009; Hegarty 2007; Voegelin 2010; Goddard, Halligan and Spelman 2013). Attali’s book is hardly an exploration of noise as material for music, being rather a short history of music as a mirror of social change. Nevertheless, its importance in relation to noise music lies in putting a positive spin on noise as reflected in this fragment:

Our science has always desired to monitor, measure, abstract, and castrate meaning, forgetting that life is full of noise and that death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and noise of beast. Noise bought, sold, or prohibited. Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.

(Attali 2014: 3)

Although these words are ambiguous, they point to the development of human-kind as a struggle to upgrade noise to a (respectable) music and culture at large. In a similar vein, Goddard, Halligan and Spelman in their introduction to the volume on noise and contemporary music observe,

Contemporary histories of popular Western musics may be more usefully read as a series of debates what, sonically and experientially, actually constitutes music in the commonly understood way, and what then constitutes, or can be termed as, and typically dismissed as, non-music.

(Goddard, Halligan and Spelman 2013: 1)

In this context it is worth mentioning that Peter Rehberg, asked by me whether his work is political, replied, 'Yes', arguing that its political dimension consists of disrupting the accepted notions of what constitutes music.

Many authors dealing with this topic point to the fact that noise is subjective and cultural. Paul Hegarty begins his *Noise/Music: A History* stating, 'Noise is not an objective fact. It occurs in relation to perception – both direct (sensory) and according to presumptions made by an individual. These are going to vary according to historical, geographical and cultural locations', and '*noise is cultural* and different groups of hearing machines will process sounds differently' (Hegarty 2007: 3). Guy-Marc Hinant concurs: 'Noise is essentially our perception of it' (Hinant 2003: 43). Salomé Voegelin pronounces, along the same lines, that 'noise is other people's music: my neighbours' collection blasting at full volume through the open balcony doors on a hot and sticky summer night' (Voegelin 2010: 44).

Noise has existed for as long as humankind, but as a problem for music it came into focus only in the twentieth century. Since then the crucial question is when noise can be treated as music. That such a problem appeared can be linked to several factors. One is a disappearance of certainty about many categories, previously regarded as stable, paradoxically resulting from development of science and technology. Henri Lefebvre states in relation to this problem:

Around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge, of social practice, of political power . . . Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as systems of reference, along with other former 'commonplaces' such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality and so forth.

(quoted in Harvey 1991: 425)

To build on this assertion we can say that up to the early twentieth century, the problem of music (as of art at large) was that of essence – music was meant to have specific intrinsic qualities to have this status bestowed on it. Since then it shifted towards its context – its relationship with environment. Music, it can be said, is what we want it to be, what we recognise as music. This can include what was previously discarded as noise, the aural equivalent of trash. Hence, it

is worth referring to the concept of ‘trash aesthetics’, which originated in Walter Benjamin’s writings, especially his *Arcade Project*. Ben Highmore writes that ‘modernity produces the obsolescences as part of the continual demand for the new’ (Highmore 2002: 61). The faster humanity develops, the more trash it produces and the greater the temptation to save some of it for posterity.

There are several reasons why the 1910s are important for noise music. One is the work of the Second Viennese school of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg which proposed a break with ‘the traditional tripartite hegemony of harmony, melody and rhythm’ (Tham 2013: 259); the other is some new artistic and philosophical movements, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, which – each in its own way – embarked on collecting and edifying the debris of human production and life. Of them the first is most important. For Futurists, the sounds emitted by car engines, factories and telephones provided an ongoing symphony. Kim Cascone notes that

[t]he Italian Futurist painter Luigi Russolo was so inspired by a 1913 orchestral performance of a composition by Balilla Pratella that he wrote a manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, in the form of a letter to Pratella. His manifesto and subsequent experiments with *intonarumori* (noise intoners), which imitated urban industrial sounds, transmitted a viral message to future generations, resulting in Russolo’s current status as the ‘grandfather’ of contemporary ‘post-digital’ music. The Futurists considered industrial life a source of beauty, and for them it provided an ongoing symphony. Car engines, machines, factories, telephones, and electricity had been in existence for only a short time, and the resulting din was a rich palette for the Futurists to use in their sound experiments.

(Cascone 2000: 14)

Russolo himself observed that

[t]he evolution of music is comparable to the multiplication of machines, which everywhere collaborate with man . . . Today, the machine has created such a variety and contention of noises that pure sound in its slightness and monotony no longer provokes emotion . . . Musical sound is too limited in its variety of timbres . . . We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds . . . The variety of noises is infinite. If today, having perhaps a thousand different machines, we are able [to] distinguish a thousand different noises, tomorrow, with the multiplication of new machines, we will be able to distinguish ten, twenty, or thirty thousand different noises, not simply by imitation, but by combining according to our fancy.

(Russolo 2004: 11–14)

The importance of Pratella’s work and its theorisation by Russolo was manifold. It expanded our understanding of what constitutes music and shifted attention

from a foreground to background sounds, most important to sounds which are produced accidentally and are ‘detritus’ or ‘by-product’ of normal industrial production (Cascone 2000: 13). Russolo was also a creator of the earliest noise machines, the *intonarumori*, which were used to ‘simulate the sounds of the industrialized urban landscapes and modern military hardware’ (Tham 2013: 259). However, these early noise machines were primitive and difficult to produce. Only in the 1950s did the technology of sound production catch up with the theory of noise as music, thanks to the invention and availability of the tape machine. As a result, many experimental composers of this period, such as Pierre Schaeffer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luc Ferrari, Bernard Parmegiani and John Cage, tried their hand in electronic music (ibid.: 261–2). Cage’s importance lies not only in using electronic instruments but also in challenging our ability to register and process sounds. Such an aim is most conspicuously revealed in his composition *4’33’’*:

At its 1952 debut David Tudor opened the piano keyboard lid and sat for the duration indicated in the title, implicitly inviting the audience to listen to background sounds, only closing and reopening the lid to demarcate three movements.

(Cascone 2000: 14)

4’33’’ pointed to the fact that every environment could be experienced in a completely new way – as music. Cage’s experiment was meant to wake the listeners up from their passivity; create their own versions of *4’33’’*. In this way, his work reflects the new thinking about art, pertaining to early postmodernism and associated most famously with Roland Barthes’s essay ‘From Work to Text’, in which Barthes states that the reader is the ultimate creator of art, through placing it in a specific context and furnishing it with a new meaning (Barthes 1977).

In due course, noise also became an important part of rock music. Simon Reynolds explains the fascination of noise by rock artists with a refusal to see the world as harmonious and benign, either because it does not reflect how the world really is or because such a take on reality leads to banal art:

There is a widely held view that beauty and harmony are a lie, presenting a bourgeois vision of nature and society as fundamentally balanced and ordered. And that we have an obligation to listen to noise because it shows us the grim truth of reality.

(Reynolds 2004a: 56)

All these reasons are relevant to Fennesz and Rehberg, but probably most important is their desire to escape the perceived banality of pop-rock.

From what I wrote so far, we can conjecture that noise music comes in different shapes. The one with which the two artists are most often identified (Young 2002: 51), is called ‘glitch’, also known as ‘clicks’ and ‘cuts’. Glitch is typically produced on computers using digital software to splice together small ‘cuts’ (samples)

of music from previously recorded works. These cuts are then integrated with the signature of glitch music: beats composed of glitches, clicks, scratches and otherwise ‘erroneously’ produced or sounding noise; hence the term ‘the aesthetics of failure’, coined by Cascone (2000). Glitches are often very short and are typically used in place of traditional percussion or instrumentation. Skipping CDs, scratched vinyl records, circuit bending, and other noise-like distortions feed into the creation of rhythm and feeling in glitch; it is from their use that the genre derives its name. An important representative of this technique and resulting style is Yasunao Tone, who is also mentioned by Rehberg as an inspiration.

As Hegarty observes,

to stay somewhere near the realm of noise in or with sampling is not necessarily about making something totally discordant, or relentlessly changing so there is no pattern at all . . . For noise to occur across sampling, it would have to engage all those strategies, recombine them so that “noise” in its most literal sense was itself disrupted by recognizable elements or moments of musicality, and perhaps to show awareness of its fate of losing its noisiness as it went on, or was listened to on repeated occasions, or the style became familiar.

(Hegarty 2007: 186)

These words are very important in the context of the work produced by Rehberg and Fennesz, as they do not only try to be subversive in their musical choices but also to produce music which enchants the listener. A sign, if not proof, that they have succeeded is the fact that after listening to their music for several days, I tend to hum it.

Rehberg’s career

While all the other protagonists of this book are Austrians or German-speaking nationals who at some point tried to escape Vienna, ideally to an English-speaking country, Peter Rehberg is an Englishman, albeit with Austrian roots, who moved in the opposite direction. He was born in 1968 in Tottenham to a lower-middle-class family and spent his childhood in Hertfordshire. He developed an interest in music as a teenager, not through playing instruments but through collecting records and cataloguing them, as lists fascinated him as much as records themselves. With a trainspotter’s zeal, he always tried to know the content of a given series, most importantly all records from a specific band or label.

Rehberg’s emigration had something to do with both England and Austria. Failing his A-level exams, which effectively deprived him of a university education, he went to the land of his ancestors. However, he ended up in Vienna, rather than in Salzburg, where his father came from. It was in 1987, the time when the electronic scene was budding in the Austrian capital city. In Rehberg’s opinion, ‘budding’ might even be too grand a word because there was practically

no scene in Vienna then, just a handful of people wanting to make music in a new way. Being an Englishman, Rehberg had a certain advantage over his Austrian peers, who always looked at England as the trendsetter. At the time rock was still a dominant style, in Austria and elsewhere. ‘Everybody wanted to be in a band and sound like an English band’, says Rehberg. ‘Why on Earth you would like to play like English bands, if they are coming here anyway?’ was his response. The underlying assumption of such a statement was that music from the province cannot compete with that from the centre. The only way to do so is by creating ‘new terms’. This was what effectively Vienna electronica was meant to be – music which did not try to imitate Anglo-American achievements but created them from scratch, even if taking inspiration from English and American music. Making instrumental music seemed like a much better way for ‘provincials’ to achieve success than trying to write lyrics and sing in (bad) English. It is not difficult to notice that a similar attitude permeated krautrock, except that in the case of krautrock it stemmed from a refusal to give in to American colonisation, in the case of music championed by Rehberg and his



Figure 8.1 Peter Rehberg

Photo: Ewa Mazierska



Figure 8.2 Peter Rehberg's studio

Photo: Ewa Mazierska

friend, to create 'non-British' works. By the early 1990s, hip-hop and techno displaced rock as the hegemonic style in Vienna. The good thing about techno, in Rehberg's view, was that there were not many blueprints for its production and much scope for experimentation.

The future leader of Mego started his professional life in 1987 by touring small clubs in Vienna, offering to play records he brought from London and which largely reflected on the music fashions in the late 1980s England, such as Cabaret Voltaire and the Human League, as well as those of some krautrock bands, such as Kraftwerk, Neu! and Tangerine Dream. To a large extent, then, Rehberg was in tune with many of his Austrian peers, whose taste was influenced by krautrock and the English synthpop. In Vienna Rehberg visited a club named Chelsea, located on Gürtel (still existing), assuming that in a place with such an English-friendly name he would have more chance to be accepted than elsewhere. By this point, the club played only live music, but he offered his service as a DJ and was accepted. However, after several weeks he was asked to play

different music, in tune with the audience's more mainstream taste. He refused and was sacked. Luckily, in the meantime he got in contact with different clubs and a handful of like-minded people who were keen to collaborate with him on different projects. Among them was Werner Geier, as well as Ramon Bauer, Andi Pieper and Peter Meininger. Over the next seven years he presented his skills in different venues, such as ambient rooms in techno clubs, and ran a weekly club at Blue Box called Club Duchamp, where he played experimental music using expanded DJ sets with vinyl, CDs and a synthesiser. He was also doing bits of work for the radio and contributed to local fanzines. This period culminated in setting up Mego in 1994.

In common with Patrick Pulsinger and Christian Fennesz, the majority of Rehberg's records are products of collaboration rather than his solo work. By this point, he released over twenty records. In common with fellow electronic musicians, Rehberg uses several aliases, to differentiate between his own work and that with other people, which also means between different styles. Pita is reserved for his own productions, KTL for those with Stephen O'Malley, Fenn O'Berg for collaborations with Christian Fennesz and Jim O'Rourke; the very name Fenn O'Berg is a composite of the names of these three musicians. The successes of Rehberg's records, as well as his label, led to invitations to play abroad. Rehberg became one of the most most-travelled electronic musicians from Austria, performing in the US, Australia and Japan, as well as becoming a regular feature at Sonar Festival in Barcelona. As I indicated in the introduction to this volume, he also belongs to the few Austrian musicians whose achievements are acknowledged in academic literature, published in English, even though without granting it any detailed analysis.

As with practically all musicians discussed in this book, the period after mid-2000s was difficult for Rehberg, with revenue from selling records going down and running an independent label verging on being unprofitable. Like most other 'veterans' from the 1990s, however, Rehberg survived this period partly because of amassing enough cultural capital in the better times, which allowed him to play concerts, as well as turning to other streams of income, most importantly writing music for theatre. The crisis was partly overcome thanks to the vinyl renewal, as well as the fact that much of Mego's competitors did not survive bad times.

Mego and Editions Mego

Mego came into existence in a similar way to the other labels discussed in this book. It was a child of musicians, who were keen to produce their own music and that which they liked. Two of them, Ramon Bauer and Andi Pieper, already set up the label Mainframe, best known for producing the work of Ilsa Gold, a band consisting of techno artists, Christopher Just and Peter Votava. When Peter Rehberg joined them, Mego was born. As Rehberg explains it, it happened in 1994 when they did a show in U4 Club in Vienna: 'I was in the club playing with

stuff and they were in the studio behind, and then we drilled a hole in the wall and we collaborated. That was the first time Mego was actually put on a flyer' (Rehberg 2014). Its official birth was in 1995, when it released its first record, which was *Fridge Trax* by the General Magic & Pita. The initial idea of the label was to produce techno records, but more experimental than what was offered at the time by competitors. This might be a reason why Rehberg and his friends decided to do it on their own rather than turn to Cheap, which was offering listeners more mainstream techno. Soon after the label started its operations, Fennesz got in touch with Rehberg, as he was also looking for a home for his music. The fact that there was little competition among firms releasing noise music, not only in Austria but also internationally, ensured that the label received international recognition. There were some additional factors, which helped its success, as its first releases coincided with a time of proliferation of cultural events in Vienna, as well as utilised new communication technologies. Mego was admittedly the first Austrian label which acquired an e-mail address and its own website. This was of great importance to its operations, as it allowed it to have an online shop and sell records abroad. It was the foreign sales which sustained it over the years and practically till now.

In due course, Mego put on the market more versatile music, including glitch, for which it gained most renown. Caleb Kelly in his *Crack Media* describes the productions from Mego as a perfect embodiment of the programme, proposed by Kim Cascone and not only thanks to the music it released but also its artwork by Tina Frank, whose 'granulated and distorted graphics and text . . . has close links to cracked media' (Kelly 2009: 316). Mego's collaborator, Jim O'Rourke claims that Mego has created a

brand new punk computer music, a punk aesthetic, like do it yourself, press your own records, get your own distribution going. They achieved this firstly by mutating the real-time sinewave synthesis strategies familiar from academic computer music, and secondly by taking it out of the context of art music, a move that should be recognised just as much as the music.

(quoted in Eshun 1999)

Mego's success in broaching the division between popular and academic/experimental music was recognised by awarding the label a Distinction at the 1999 Ars Electronica Festival, one of the most prestigious events showcasing electronic music.

During its existence, Mego changed its location three times. The first was at the outskirts of the city, in an old paint factory, which can be seen as symbolic for its multimedia approach. There was much space there, but the conditions were spartan and for Rehberg it felt like being far from the 'centre of things'. In the second location, in the twelfth district of Vienna, where Mego dwelled from 1998 to 2005, there was less space, but the facilities were of a higher standard. The office space was shared with Pulsinger and Tunakan's Cheap, which again can be seen as symbolic of the artistic closeness between the two labels. Finally, during

the time of Editions Mego the home of the label became Rehberg's spacious and stylish apartment near Danube Canal.

In common with Cheap, the label was commercially most successful during the first ten years of its existence. This is understandable, given that, as I wrote earlier, the 1990s was a prosperous time for the record industry. During this period, it released such classics as Fennesz's *Endless Summer* (probably the most famous record produced by Mego), Jim O'Rourke's *I'm Happy and I'm Singing* and Drumm's *Sheer Hellish Miasma*. It was in the 2000s, and especially after 2005, the sales of records went down, hitting the small, independent labels the most. In the case of Mego the downfall was made worse by the bankruptcy of one of its main distributors. Not unlike Patrick Pulsinger, who decided to fold Cheap in 2005, Rehberg's partners also left about this time. Rehberg decided to carry on, in 2006 changing the record company's name into Editions Mego. Under this name he released more records than ever before, in part capitalising on the vinyl-mania, as well as the fact that Editions Mego remains one of the few survivors in the (already-small) field of electronic music for more ambitious and experimental, as well as history-oriented, listeners, yet not strictly academic. The label thus focuses on exclusivity, a strategy that entails exploiting the desire of sophisticated consumers to signal their individuality by finding and consuming unique products (Hracs, Jakob and Hauge 2013). One specificity of Editions Mego, which strengthens its status, are sub-labels, curated by artists collaborating with the label. They include Spectrum Spools (curated by John Elliott), Recollection GRM (curated by François Bonnet and Daniel Teruggi), Ideologic Organ (curated by Stephen O'Malley) and Old News (curated by Jim O'Rourke). On Rehberg's own account, Editions Mego releases music of artists whom he knows in person. Such an approach adds to its reputation of being small and exclusive. Apart from releasing new material, it puts on the market its back catalogue, frequently on vinyl and with new artwork. This might explain the change of the company's name, from Mego to Editions Mego. The latter signifies a self-conscious take on releasing records. We tend to associate 'editions' with 'second editions' or 'luxury editions'. Such editions are for connoisseurs and those too young to witness the birth of some important phenomenon.

While Fennesz's *Endless Summer* is regarded as the record defining Mego's style, Rehberg singles out his release of *Does It Look Like I'm Here?* (2010) of an American project Emeralds, which he describes as 'US synth underground', as a turning point in its operations. An important artistic achievement of Mego was also releasing the work of Farmers Manual, a music-visual collective, founded in Vienna in the early 1990s. Its significance lies both in a quality of its music and innovative performances, described as anti-performances and overcoming the division between electronic music, experimental graphics and web design. Mego released not only music production of Farmers Manual but also its multimedia content. Of special interest is *RLA* (which stands for 'Recent Live Archive'), a DVD released in 2003, which contains the band's extensive back catalogue of live concert recordings from 1995 to 2003, compressed in MP3 format – totalling three days and twenty hours of audio content. Comparing *Endless Summer* with

Does It Look Like I'm Here? and *Farmers Manual*'s work demonstrates the versatility of the label. Not surprisingly, in his interviews Rehberg protests against pigeonholing himself and Mego as 'laptop music':

One of the things we've always had around our neck is this whole laptop thing, which wasn't something anyone sat down and decided, 'Okay, we can use laptops now'. One of the things I always wanted to do when we started this back in the mid-'90s was that it wouldn't become a genre-based label, because I used to work in a record store at the time and I remember a lot of the techno distributors would send in faxes of all the new records and the description of the record was always just one of five words . . . It was always a very minimized vocabulary of how to describe music. Everything in this little box. (Rehberg 2014)

Indeed, Mego is a broad church. However, as with all churches, one has to be a believer, to enjoy it. Jumping to Mego straight from listening to Justin Bieber might be a leap of faith too far.

Rehberg's style

In relation to Rehberg's productions, critics use adjectives such as *hardcore*, *difficult*, *austere*, *intimidating* and *morbid*. A fellow traveller, Christian Fennesz, describes Rehberg as 'the first one [in Vienna] to make weird ambient music and industrial music like John Cage' (Fennesz 2008). For me it is not as intimidating as quirky and whimsical, perhaps reflecting the fact that Rehberg was born in England, where idiosyncrasies are more tolerated than elsewhere, although arguably the same can be said about Austria.

Obviously Rehberg creates moods through sound. As with other glitch artists, he is also keen to expand what we can hear, absorb and appreciate as music. I mentioned earlier in this book that many electronic musicians see themselves as librarians and curators, who reorganise acquired sounds. This might be also the case of Rehberg, but his music lacks the 'found-footage' quality of stuff placed in quotation marks. Instead, the sounds feel fresh; their ability to startle us relies on this quality. Laptops and synthesisers are, for Rehberg, machines producing new sounds. As I already mentioned, he is considered an important representative of laptop music, although in recent years he abandoned the computer-based synthesis in favour of a hardware modular synthesiser.

One thing which differentiates Rehberg's work from the other artists discussed in this volume is that shifts in volume and intensity are very abrupt. One reviewer warned to keep the volume always low because the sound might become very loud when we least expect it (Leitko 2016). It feels like the artist wants to free the listener of any illusion of security. There is also a remarkable lack of ornamentation; the music comes across as reduced to its basics. Such a description also fits the techno productions of Patrick Pulsinger, as discussed in the previous

chapter, but Pulsinger's works are based on beat; one can easily dance to them. By contrast, it is not easy to dance to Rehberg's tune. At the beginning of his career as a DJ, Rehberg was described as an 'ambient DJ', a label which he treats with amusement. Initially I was smiling too, as, following Brian Eno, we associate 'ambient music' with music for airports and, in a wider sense, a music which brightens the environment. However, it suits a more general description of ambient music as offered by Eno: 'a place, a feeling, an all-around tint to my sonic environment' (Eno 2004b: 96). In the case of Rehberg the feeling is usually of an approaching disaster. The disaster can be industrial: machines malfunctioning or their parts getting entangled with their products and emitting agonising noise. Again, one can think about techno. However, while techno producers celebrate or commemorate the well-functioning Fordist factories of Detroit or East Germany, Rehberg's music 'could have been seen as the ruins, or maybe the corpse of techno' (Sasaki 1999). Another type of disaster Rehberg's music evokes is one caused by cosmic or semi-natural forces – invasions of aliens, collision of planets, in a style typical for technostalgia of the 1990s (Taylor 2001: 96–114). On other occasions we can hear the flapping of wings of some insects which grew unnaturally large or mutated with robots and launched an attack on humans. One can think in this context about Pauline Oliveros's 'Bye Bye Butterfly'. Finally, there is a man-made menace: violence and hatred. Menace of this type pertains to Rehberg's theatrical scores.

Titles are purposefully difficult to decipher, typically consisting of numbers, combinations of letters, for example 'Mfbk' or descriptions of the place of a given track on the record, such as '3' or 'Track Seven'. Such abstract titles parallel those favoured by some producers of Intelligent Dance Music, such as the English duo Autechre, which bears association with the approach taken by the twentieth-century avant-garde, who, as Dahlhaus notes, eschewed conventional work titles in favour of more abstract ones such as 'Constellations', 'Figures' or 'Prisms', which suggest a shared aesthetic preoccupation with the 'idea of absolute music' (Drott 2013: 5). Behind such choice one can detect a refusal to attribute discursive content to compositions, forcing the listener to consider a given piece as being 'something' rather than 'about something', to use a famous phrase of Susan Sontag. Of course, music of this type is difficult to describe and examine, unless from merely technical perspective. As to confirm this opinion, Rob Young asks rhetorically,

How do you announce the title of Pita's "˘~/" out loud? . . . It is a title – and by extension, a music – that can only be typed, not spoken, which explains why so many glitch tracks end up with names that use invented or hybrid words, or signifiers that look like binary code.

(Young 2002: 51)

And yet, as I argued earlier, the soundscape which Rehberg produces bears witness to the times in which he lives.

Seven Tons For Free (1996)

Rehberg's first album, *Seven Tons For Free*, is filled with repetitions of high-frequency digital sounds, resembling clocks ticking, work of factory machines and medical equipment monitoring the activities of human organs. A member of my family who accidentally listened to a fragment said that it sounds like a 'washing machine on its last legs', quite aptly, given that the genre in which Rehberg was to specialise was described by Cascone as informed by the 'aesthetic of failure'. There is little there of melody, something to hum when the record is finished. What remains is a dreary mood, a premonition of danger. The sounds are reduced to pulse signals, on occasions extremely high-pitched and 'scratchy'. However, the music is continuous; there is no sense of samples being unmatched.

The musician is reluctant to reveal what the sounds are meant to represent or does not want them to represent anything, as testified by titles of four tracks, which do not include any words, only mathematical symbols, as if signifying the length or the wave or the position of a track in a series (i, ii, iii), pointing to Rehberg's fascination with lists and orders. The titles of the remaining tracks, 'Boiler', 'Fehler (Error)' and 'Seven Tons Revised', are technical rather than human. That said, 'Boiler' might suggest that behind cold machines a hot heart is beating. After all, hospital machinery is meant to save human lives. Naming the album *Seven Tons For Free* is provocative and humorous, suggesting that Rehberg conceded that few people will be willing to pay for music of this type, hence better to donate it – a rational move, given that a decade or so later almost everybody would give his or her music for free, uploading it on YouTube or Soundcloud. It feels as if Rehberg wanted to explore what can be done with computer as a sonic machine. That last and longest track, 'Seven Tons Revised', is the most accessible, as if by this point the composer wanted to reward us for our patience by including more melody while preserving the original idea of exploring textures and dark moods.

Listening to *Seven Tons For Free* I wondered how this music was received in a live setting. Part of the answer was provided by Rehberg himself, who confessed, almost with pride that he was chased out clubs because his stuff was 'too heavy'. Another answer was given by David Toop, who described his experience of listening to Rehberg (and other noise musicians) in this way:

I am standing in a large hall at the Sonar Festival in Barcelona. On stage is the trio of Christian Fennesz, Jim O'Rourke and Peter 'Pita' Rehberg. All three are playing laptop computers and the movements of their fingertips on trackpads are projected on screens. The assertion of human presence within the improvised evolution of their performance – a dense layering of musical samples and digital processing – adds to the disorientation of music created in the moment, with minimal physicality and the technology that conceals, rather than reveals. The discomfort of hearing it in a large hall, standing up, surrounded by a half-interested crowd that mills and chatters, leaves me stranded in a mood of ennui. The music sounds wonderful but this is not how I want to hear it.

(Toop 2004: 228)

These words suggest that music of this type needs to be researched first in private before it can be enjoyed in public. This, in my view, results not only from the fact that repeated listening pays dividends but also because the product of Rehberg's work is not only music but a soundscape as well. It needs a special space to fill it in a right way; in a place whose natural ambience clashes with the mood of his composition, it does not work.

***Get Out* (1999), *Get Down* (2002), *Get Off* (2004)
and *Get In* (2016)**

The titles of these four records invite us to treat them together. All of them betray a similar attitude to the listener, asking him or her to do something rather than listen passively, not unlike Steve Reich's 1966 composition, *Come Out*. They also show a progression. The first title sounds most unwelcoming, revealing the attitude of a young musician, who refuses to flatter his listeners, perhaps due to his awareness that he has little competition in his field, a fact to which Rehberg alluded in our interview. By contrast, *Get In* asks us to immerse ourselves in his music, with a humility pertaining to older people, as well as artists whose music competes with millions of tracks available on Spotify and iTunes. There are other differences between the records. The first three were created on laptop, the last one using a modular synthesiser.

The title *Get Out* suggests that the record is directed only to hardcore fans of noise music, excluding those with a more mainstream taste. Indeed, of the three records with *get* in the title, this one eschews melody and harmony most ostentatiously, offering a high-pitched shrill of knives grinding on a malfunctioning machine on the track titled '1' and cosmic noise on the track '2'. But after this ear-splitting noise a patient listener is rewarded with a delicate theme which begins '3'. After a couple of minutes the melody is attacked by more aggressive noise, and then by even noisier, ear-splitting sounds, but it survives till the very end. For a listener unfamiliar with Rehberg's work and unsympathetic to noise music, the track feels like a battle between music and noise, whose outcome is uncertain. For those, however, who are able to appreciate the beauty of glitch, the track demonstrates how melody and noise can create a powerful synthesis. Although the track lasts more than eleven minutes, it feels continuous and the transitions between samples are concealed. Not without reason, this remained the most 'classic' track among those composed by Rehberg (Owen 2016), and *Get Out* was described as the cacophonous equivalent of a romantic symphony (Scaruffi 2003) because there is pathos there, and a sense of yearning, characteristic of romantic music. The cover for this record shows triangle-like overlapping shapes, in different shades of blue, against a blue background. Such artwork can be seen as a reflection of a rhizome-like approach applied by Rehberg on practically all his records, but on this especially. This means that there are no leading themes, no leitmotifs, but the tracks are nevertheless connected. The shades of blue also bring to mind icebergs crashing into each other and destroying a ship.

In comparison with *Get Out*, tracks on *Get Down* come across as more fragmented and, ultimately, noisier. This is announced by the opening track, 'We

Don't Need No Music', filled with a drone. '43353.rf' was described as 'free-jazz duet between two robots' (Scaruffi 2003). The remaining tracks also bring to mind robots, perhaps employed on a spaceship, as this is still a place where robots are most common. One can think about science-fiction films from the 1970s and 1980s, which were filled with such noises, such as the Polish *Test pilota Pirxa* (The Test of Pilot Pirx, 1979), which concerns the ultimate unreliability of robots. 'Track Seven' and 'Fine Swex', closing the record, confirm such an interpretation, as they sound like a chaotic encounter of angry robots, left to their own devices. Unlike on *Get Out*, there is nothing melancholic here, maybe because such a sentiment is reserved for humans – admittedly even the most advanced machines lack advanced feelings. The idea that *Get Down* is a story of robots is alluded to by the cover, which dispenses with abstractions, adorning Rehberg's earlier albums, and shows a cartoon-like humanoid creature with an angry look on his face.

Get In is the work which is marked not so much by innovation as maturity. The pieces on the record can be seen as versions of the tracks produced earlier, but the sounds feel cleaner, as if the artist was more assured about what he wanted to achieve. On this occasion the goal is more important than the road. It begins with 'cosmic' sounds of 'FVO', resembling soundtracks to old science-fiction films, followed by sounds of the space battle in '201506091'. A catchy 'S200729' (as catchy as a noise music can be) creates in my mind the image of an all-absorbed musician searching for a lost melody and oblivious to everything which happens around him. At the same time as he comes closer to it, his space is invaded by menacing sounds, whose goal is to destroy the music and the musician, although he manages to hold on. However, the track following it, '9U2016', suggests that the victory was temporary, as this piece is pure noise, with the ending sounding like a victorious alien inspecting the ruins of human civilisation and making sure that nobody survived. The record finishes with 'MFbk', one of the most ambient pieces in Rehberg's career. The longest cut, it

requires its ten minutes to expand ambient drift into harmonised organ and low string tones, and for a sense of pulse to emerge from repeat patterns of slow-motion rhythm. And it sounds just gorgeous, with acoustic depth and vibrancy, and becomes almost hymnal at the end.

(Owen 2016)

It brings to mind a landscape after a nuclear or cosmic disaster. It is a beautiful yet somewhat sterile landscape, making one miss the noise. The records, as on most earlier occasions, features artwork by Tina Frank which, as usual, is abstract. This time it shows colourful shapes against a black background, as if the remnants of a planet float in space.

Work for GV 2004–2008 (2008)

Music on this record is a result of Rehberg's collaboration with French theatre director, choreographer, puppeteer and visual artist Gisèle Vienne. It contains

scores to her three stage productions: *I Apologize*, *Une Belle Enfant Blonde* and *Jerk*. This collaboration can be described as a marriage in heaven if not for the fact that the imagination of both artists is dark. Vienne, by her own account, explores the relationship between natural and artificial bodies and disturbing strangeness, resulting from their encounter (Vienne 2017). Judging by the synopsis of her plays, she is particularly interested in violence inflicted on women by men. The dolls used in her productions do not signify carefree childhood, but innocence destroyed. Rehberg also explores the unknown through creating dark, disturbing soundscapes. In his world nothing is safe; danger is just below the surface, like a gigantic insect or a drone about to attack its victim. However, while on Rehberg's earlier records the danger remained undefined, on this record it gets a distinctive shape, thanks to using lyrics as well as more explicit titles, such as 'Murder Version', 'Slow Investigation', 'Boxes and Angels' and 'Final Jerk'.

The lyrics appear first in 'ML3'. Here an American poet and Vienne's long-standing collaborator, Dennis Cooper, presents a story of domestic violence perpetrated by a husband on his wife and most likely retold to another man, her real or prospective lover. 'She is my wife, so what?', asks the man, impersonated by Cooper. In this world, it seems, family ties are no excuse to 'get rough'; rather, the opposite is true – home is the place where a man can reveal his true face of a rapist and sadist. In 'Black Holes' the protagonist admits, 'My empty sockets feel like evil eyes to you'. Such declarations are made against the buzzing noise of Rehberg's computer, often punctuated by bursts of much louder noise, sometimes imitating crying, perhaps announcing that the violence is taking place or a sound bringing association with climbing the stairs, an activity rendered uncanny by film noir.

Musically, the most accomplished is eleven-minute-long 'Boxes and Angels', a piece to which one wants to return, despite its darkness. The sound is buzzing, as if made by a drone or a huge insect. As one reviewer aptly described it,

it is based around a repeating, strobing synth riff, morphed, modulated and shattered across an extended period – it's the kind of strategy we've heard before on Pita's *Get Out* or the Fenn O'Berg releases. Waves of noise flood in alongside trance-inducing, quasi-orchestral chord sequences, resulting in something that's at once ear-bending and unnervingly emotive. It's an exceptional piece, and like so much of the music here, just couldn't have been made by anyone else.

(Boomkat)

The cover of the record shows a doll clad in a red hoodie. The doll is very realistic and can be easily mistaken for a teenage girl. The obvious association is with the story of Red Riding Hood, which many contemporary readers interpret as a story of violence inflicted by 'human wolves' on young women who dare to venture into an unknown place. Photos inside the CD include a pair of children's shoes in a transparent plastic bag, with some tag attached to it, suggesting that it is a forensic artefact, collected at a crime scene. The works of Vienne and Rehberg are not meant to entertain, but to challenge us (Wuethrich 2008).

Christian Fennesz's career

Christian Fennesz was born in 1962, into a middle-class family with Hungarian roots from his father's side, which explains his non-Germanic name. His father was a professional officer. He spent his childhood and teenage years on the Lake Neusiedl, before moving to Vienna. He went to a music high school and took lessons in classical guitar. Afterwards he studied musicology at the university in Vienna but did not finish the course.

In terms of age, Fennesz is closer to Andy Orel than Richard Dorfmeister, Patrick Pulsinger or Peter Rehberg. This means that his formative period was some years before the explosion of electronic music in Europe. Not surprisingly, he prepared himself for the career of a rocker rather than a studio musician. Nevertheless, as with most protagonists in this book and as a model 'studio musician', as described by Eno, he was unable to compose music in the traditional way. As he puts it, 'I'm just playing. It's more of a gypsy kind of approach' (Crowell 2014). His guitar skills ensured him a place in the Viennese guitar bands, including Maische, which got some recognition on the local rock scene in the 1980s. Simultaneously, Fennesz was drawn to electronic equipment, as a way to overcome the limitations of rock. Like Rehberg, he welcomed the emergence of techno in Vienna, although he could not fully commit himself to producing techno music, as texture rather than rhythm was his main concern and the atmosphere of a discotheque did not



Figure 8.3 Christian Fennesz

Photo Kevin Westenber

suit his style. Not surprisingly, he was among the first artists to sign up with Mego Records and in 1997 released his first LP, *Hotel Paralel.lel*. This record was followed with the 1998 single ‘Plays’, which contained near-unrecognisable covers of the Rolling Stones’ ‘Paint It Black’ and the Beach Boys’ ‘Don’t Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)’. In 2001, Fennesz released his third studio album *Endless Summer*, which remained his commercially most successful record to date, hailed as proof that noise music can be charming and palatable by the public.

Since his debut, on top of producing solo work, Fennesz collaborated with artists as different as David Sylvian, Keith Rowe, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Patrick Pulsinger, Peter Rehberg and Jim O’Rourke. One advantage of such numerous collaborations is overcoming the limitations of the local and national scene. As I mentioned in the introduction, he is perhaps the most-covered electronic musician from Vienna in English language literature. Fennesz might not sell large numbers of records in one country, but he has fans all over the world, including in my own university. This is also reflected in his numerous travels and participation in music festivals. These collaborations allow him to venture into genres which he might not be able to explore on his own. In part, thanks to his collaborations, Fennesz, in common with Rupert Huber and Patrick Pulsinger, is able to navigate between the two poles of electronic music: popular and experimental, without facing accusations of being either a ‘sell-out’ or too elitist. Needless to add, such an approach allows him to continue as a full-time musician in times when income from recordings is much lower than when he started his career. As with some other artists covered in this book, Fennesz spent part of his life abroad, in Paris. Nevertheless, when I met him in 2015, he was back in Vienna and looking for a new studio.

Fennesz’s artistic output is huge and can be divided into several strands. Apart from his single-authored studio albums, there are numerous records of live recordings, collaboration albums, remixes and soundtracks. However, most important for those treating him as an *auteur* are his single-produced works, and there are only six of them, indicating that the composer takes much time to produce them. Unlike his colleagues working in different genres, Fennesz does not use aliases. However, he has something of a stage name thanks to dropping his first name – he is known as Fennesz rather than Christian Fennesz, not unlike the leader of the Smiths, who is known simply as Morrissey.

Fennesz’s style

Fennesz questions the division of music into electronic and non-electronic and serious/experimental and popular. The former is reflected in his love of guitar, which he uses in his recordings and performances. As he confessed, ‘I wanted to keep using the guitar sound because that’s my main instrument and it’s the sound world I know the best’ (Fennesz 2008). Fennesz also argues that electronic music ceased to be a separate genre, because electronic instruments are used by practically all pop-rock musicians. His sources of inspiration also bear witness to his double heritage: rock and electronic. On one hand, he acknowledges the influence of techno and declares himself a big fan of Brian Eno. On the other hand,

however, he mentions his love of the music of Neil Young and the Beach Boys, and among his list of collaborators are not only producers of ‘hardcore’ electronic music but also rock musicians experimenting with electronic instruments, such as David Sylvian.

Fennesz often performs in places associated with high art, such as museums, galleries and opera houses, yet he also admits that he feels most comfortable on the rock stage. Leaning towards the popular is also reflected in the titles of his records and songs, which evoke places and moods, rather than the technical properties of the medium he uses. *Endless Summer*, *Venice*, *Hotel Paral.lel*, *Bécs* and *Black Sea* evoke memories of a holiday, not in a faraway, exotic place but rather closer, more ‘homely’, ‘European Orient’, such as Italy, Spain, Romania or California. Such titles suggest that Fennesz wants his music to represent something, rather than be (autonomous), which is typically the case of modernist, experimental art. In his music we find a quest for a memorable, haunting melody or perhaps music is merely a vehicle to resurrect an old experience. As the artist himself admitted, when he composes, his head is full of visions; there is a ‘cinematographic aspect to it’. Searching for a new sound, experimenting with textures and structures is never a goal in itself. Hence, Fennesz’s records, especially *Endless Summer*, are described by critics as a perfect way to lure to electronic music those listeners who are unfamiliar with or prejudiced against electronic instruments. As one reviewer put it, ‘with *Endless Summer*, Fennesz had invested the laptop with a soul hitherto reserved for “real instruments”, and it was just what listeners had been waiting for’ (Meggitt 2007). By ‘listeners’ the author means the part of the audience who listens to music largely for pleasure, as opposed to widening their intellectual horizons. Yet, the subgenre of electronic music with which Fennesz is identified is ‘glitch’. This very term, as I argued earlier, concerns the unmelodic, purposefully irritating pole of electronic music. I will list several reasons for Fennesz’s ‘glitching’. One is his desire to discover what kind of sounds one can get from electronic instruments. For the same reasons and as a sign of appreciation of his avant-garde interests, he was approached by producers of musical instruments and software to test and advise on new electronic devices. The second, although related, reason for using the aesthetic of glitch is breaking the pleasure of listening to soothing music, to which – due to its very soothing quality – we might pay little attention. Its programmatic malfunction saves it from being relegated to the background, as this is how ambient music is frequently perceived, largely because of its functionality (as something creating ambience to a romantic evening), and downgraded as kitsch, because the very act of creating ambience is perceived as inauthentic, because of forcing a meaning on something which should have a meaning by itself. Finally and most important, Fennesz, like Rehberg, finds noise beautiful.

Fennesz’s hybrid approach to electronic music is also reflected in his live performances, in which he plays guitar, as well as electronic instruments. Such behaviour can be regarded as a reaction to a criticism that in electronic music the human performer is superfluous; it is enough to programme a computer in the studio and then let it do the job by just pressing the right button. Fennesz himself agrees with this criticism, saying,

When I started making this kind of music in the early 90s, I abandoned guitar for a while and just played laptops live. In the studio, I always used guitar sounds to make my samples: make a bank, an archive of samples I could work with. Later on, when I was playing onstage I felt something was missing. It was just boring. So I started playing guitar onstage live.

(quoted in Crowell 2014)

Needless to say, this makes him very busy. Fennesz's stage persona brings to mind Ian Williams from the American band Battles, who on stage seems to struggle to take care of all the instruments needed to create the required effect. Fennesz is perhaps slightly less busy, yet he also gives an impression of improvising rather than merely setting computers in motion. As with Sofa Surfers, his performances are often multi-media spectacles. As with his music, Fennesz's collaborators betray his cosmopolitan mind-set. Among them are the Italian animator Giuseppe La Spada, English graphic designer Jon Wozencroft (who set up the Touch label), Berlin-based multimedia artist Lillevan and fellow Austrian Tina Frank, who designed covers for many of his records and directed the only video for his track. The collaboration, on Fennesz's own account, is not limited to these artists providing visuals for his (finished) work; it is an outcome of improvisation.

Hotel Paral.lel (1997)

Fennesz's first solo LP is an odd one in his career because of its heavy and menacing mood, contrasting with the lighter tones of his subsequent records. It sounds more like Peter Rehberg's record than Fennesz of *Endless Summer* and *Venice*, and it feels as if at this stage the musician was testing the possibilities of creating sounds using different pieces of equipment rather than searching for a charming melody, hidden in the depth of his mind. The sources of inspiration for these sounds seem varied: industrial, cosmic and domestic noises (broken or poorly tuned radio and television sets) and even those heard in offices (Xerox machines). The sound on the first track, '2', brings to mind grinding machines in an old-fashioned factory, played against the sounds of approaching tanks. The second track, 'Nebenraun', offers a sound of apocalypse, coming from outer space. Yet, the mood lightens up, as if the spaceships did not bring hostile aliens but more friendly creatures. 'Blok M' comes across as pure experiment in texture, in which melody does not matter. The middle part of the record includes the most memorable pieces: 'Santora', 'Dheli Pizza' and 'Fa'. As one reviewer put it, 'Santora' is a 'simple exercise in slow, subtle noise variation, opening with arrhythmic clicking resembling radio static cast in steel. The sound begins dry but, as the song progresses, it starts to bunch up and scatter unevenly, revealing a low, resonant drone easing in behind. Later, as the clicking sputters out, that resonance is more cleanly revealed; a distant alarm bell, perhaps, ringing alone in the echo-traversed space of a cavernous basement (Dorr 2007). The same reviewer described 'Dheli Pizza' as a ghostly presence, followed by a 'full assembly line of rattling machines that eventually clatter off into the dark again' (ibid.). 'Fa' is a dark techno piece.

'Traxdata', although still brings associations with factory work, because of being dominated by a buzzing sound, is more melodic and acts as a premonition of Fennesz's later productions.

The title of the record is taken from a hotel in Barcelona, where Fennesz was staying shortly before he embarked on making this record. In this sense it begins a series of his records which wear their connection to a specific place on their sleeves, literally and figuratively. It is also symbolic, as it suggests the existence of parallel worlds: internal and external, artificial and natural, human and robotic, cosmic and Earth-like. One can imagine the hotel in Barcelona as a portal to these different worlds, with noisy and mysterious neighbours, hidden rooms and secret passages. This impression is strengthened by the titles of some tracks, such as 'Nebenraum', 'Blok M', 'Herbert Missing' and 'Aus'. Fennesz mixes here German with English words, bringing to mind Falco's multilingualism. The difference lies in the fact that the tracks are instrumental; hence, their discursive content is limited to their titles.

The monochromatic cover, designed by Tina Frank, a graphic designer and video artist who has collaborated with Mego practically throughout the whole period of the label's existence, shows the reworking of an original photo, taken by a friend of Fennesz. It shows Lake Neusiedl, on whose shores Fennesz was living in his childhood. However, the greenish image is so abstracted that this information is only available to those who know the background to the cover (as I learnt through correspondence with Tina Frank). When I was looking at the picture I thought that it is a reworking of the photograph of the eponymous hotel. The object on the cover looks like a bridge, although in reality we see wooden pegs planted in the lake. The impression is strengthened by the remaining pictures on the record where we see more bridges, surrounded by anaemic greenery. The idea of a portal or bridge comes to mind again.

Frank was also the author of the only video produced for this album, for the track titled 'Aus'. The video begins as a montage of stills – a variation of the cover image, with its motifs of a bridge, a pier and some bare trees. All landscape photography came from a series of Lake Neusiedl made by Fennesz's friend. Then proper moving images are introduced in the form of found footage of old amateur 8mm films, taken by Tina Frank's father when she was a child. They show the family in domestic situations, including an elderly man (Tina's grandfather) receiving a chair as birthday present, as well as fragments of old animated films. These images are edited in such a way that the viewer is prevented from constructing a coherent narrative, and the video accentuates the materiality and hapticity of the image. This effect is achieved by using footage of low quality, so that the scratches on the print are visible, as well as providing black background to parts of the film and showing the frames in slow motion. At some point it looks like the print is burning. The effect is of watching *film projection* rather than *film*. There is a connection between the aesthetics used by Fennesz on the record, including on this track and the aesthetics employed by Frank. Both artists proudly show that they recycle and rework existing material rather than producing their work from *scratch*. Fennesz comes across as a collector of sounds, Frank as a collector

of images. They also cherish and celebrate *scratch*, glitch, hiccup, malfunction, dissonance, noise, perhaps because it is an important part of our landscapes and soundscapes or because it allows us to recognise that our aesthetic choices are culture-specific. There are no beautiful and ugly images and sounds per se; we learn to regard them as beautiful or ugly. Artists like Fennesz and Frank want us, if not to change our taste entirely, at least to consider different aesthetic options.

***Endless Summer* (2001)**

While the mood of *Hotel Paral.lel* is gloomy, *Endless Summer* conveys joy. Its optimism is signaled by the record's artwork, again designed by Tina Frank. It shows a beach at sunset, in warm colours, with silhouettes of people enjoying good weather, a sky and a palm tree. Yet, as with *Hotel Paral.lel*, the images are reworked, devoid of detail, so that only contours of photographed objects are visible. The horizontal lines on the photos suggest that they were taken from the other side of the window. Moreover, each image is framed and arranged in a way that gives impression of browsing through a photo album. The message is that the record will not present the experience of being in the sun from dusk till dawn but rather its artistic representation, will not be about holidaying, but about faded memories of summer conveyed through tourist clichés. Such clichés are also immortalised in pop music, and Fennesz makes us aware of them by including his cover of the Beach Boys' song 'Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)'. Or, as one review put it, it is 'kinda' cover 'because I can't hear any direct reference to the original, though I do think Fennesz captured some kind of essence with his version' (Richard-San 2001). *Endless Summer* is also the title of a Beach Boys compilation from the 1970s, although according to Fennesz, he was not aware of that when making this record; he got the title from Bruce Brown's film *The Endless Summer* (1966). The reference to the Beach Boys reflects well on Fennesz's take on past music. By reusing old songs he proves that, as with most electronic musicians, he is an archivist and a historian, collecting old stories and putting them in a new context, and that the heritage on which he draws is the high end of pop. This is the place the Beach Boys occupy, a band whose name was provocatively self-depreciative and kitschy, but whose music was innovative, in a large part thanks to using a wide range of instruments, such as organ, Fender bass, bongos, piccolo, cellos and the Theremin and experimenting with textures (Prendergast 2003: 198). Of course, Fennesz's trick is not merely to quote or imitate but also to rework. This is where the 'glitch' aesthetics comes into play. The music at times sounds as if an old record was scratched, spoiling our pleasure of listening to a simple melody and making us aware of the material base of music. According to Joanna Demers, Fennesz 'touches on the impossibility of returning to the past' (Demers 2010: 63). Although music comes across as spiritual, it is created by material instruments and reproduced mechanically (or at least this was the case till recently). The scratches and glitches can also be interpreted as a reference to climate change. While 'endless summer' might be a tourist's paradise, it is actually a nightmare for ecologically minded people, who see in it the end

of humanity and the Earth itself. The tension between a naïve guitar playing and processing sounds on a computer can be regarded as a metaphor for the conflict between a naïve enjoyment of summer in California or Florida and the bashing by green organisations about the approaching apocalypse caused by global warming.

How does the synthesis of a simple melody and glitch work in practice? Fennesz is not scared to challenge the listener, as demonstrated by the fact that he begins with ‘Made in Hongkong’, the least melodic track on the record, a kind of continuation of his first LP. Afterwards the quest for melody overpowers or at least balances Fennesz’s drive to experiment with noise. Every song works according to its own logic, although there are also commonalities. Once a theme is presented, it is repeated many times in a track, usually with slight changes in texture. On the title track, it feels like a guitar line tries to break through the sea of noise, which at times brings association with a malfunctioning computer, with its hisses and clicks. One can think about a proponent of ‘aesthetics of failure’, as presented by Cascone, entering into a dialogue with an old-style rocker, with the latter not only holding on but also prevailing in the end. In ‘Caecilia’, again, we have a struggle between melody and noise. However, on this occasion, as one blogger put it eloquently, ‘marimba notes float in and out of the hazy distortion in a manner that belies a certain yearning which is followed up by a simple guitar chord structure that reinforces the feeling evoked in the bell section’ (Zoltar 2010). The longest piece on the record, ‘Happy Audio’, breaks with this rule, as on this occasion the track is organised around a simple pattern, repeated with small variations till the end. There is no struggle between noise and melody – noise is used to produce a ‘happy sound’. True to its title, we can think about some kind of radio transmission; what is of interest to Fennesz on this occasion, again linking him to the ‘aesthetics of failure’ is that he pays attention not to what is transmitted, but to the transmission itself. Another track worthy of attention is ‘Before I Leave’. It is made up of long notes, played on an organ or on a computer simulating an organ sound, enriched by clicks, producing a sense of perfect harmony between the analogue and digital worlds.

No doubt the commercial and artistic success of this music lies in perfectly hybridising melody and noise, marrying electronic and traditional instruments, as well as producing a sense of space and mood – something which lies at the core of ambient music. This quality was recognised by David Toop, who wrote apropos this record:

This fluctuation between two states, a music that seems in some way familiar and another layer decomposing from that source material, evokes a feeling of nostalgia. Perversely, a desire suggests itself, to holiday for eternity in this endless summer without a place. How to travel there? ‘The beach itself has eroded over time, literally washing away’, wrote Lena Lencek and Gideon Bosker in their book, *The Beach: The History of Paradise on Earth*. This sense of the inexorable erosion of perfection, sweet dreams fading in the harsh light of mediated emotion, seems to me to be central to Fennesz, and

when he arrests that dissipation, paradise momentarily out of focus as if video-paused, the feeling is bittersweet.

(Toop 2004: 231)

Finding another perfect match for these different elements informs Fennesz's subsequent work. This is the reason that he sustained his place among the leading creators of Vienna electronica, but also a source of certain disappointment that he never tried to make something completely different, at least not in his solo work.

***Venice* (2004) and *Black Sea* (2008)**

Venice and *Black Sea* were released on the Touch label, based in London. The most likely reason that Fennesz moved to Touch was that during this period Mego suffered serious difficulties, broadly reflecting the crisis following 'online-sation' of music distribution. However, this is barely reflected in the music made by Fennesz, testifying to the fact that both companies give artists much artistic freedom. The only visible difference pertains to the artwork, which is quite different from that by Tina Frank.

Despite its subtle references to global warming, *Endless Summer* can be enjoyed on the beach without feeling guilty about one's pleasure. The mood of *Venice* and *Black Sea* is considerably darker. This is, again, announced by the titles of these two records. *Venice* connotes beauty, stagnation and death. Venice is famous for its resistance to change and deadly diseases, of which its carnival is a potent reminder. The city is supposedly sentenced to disappearance because of the rise of the sea level, which eventually will submerge its houses and bridges. It is also metaphorically dying because of the invasion by tourists, which drives the local population out. Some of these connotations are suggested by the cover of Fennesz's record, with a photograph of an old wooden rowboat marooned in shallow waters and with another one, in the distance, also immobile. As well as pointing to Venice's immobility and its resistance to change, it suggests that the tourist-artist will approach his topic slowly and with care, respecting its distrust of all things modern.

Colin Buttimer, in his review for BBC Music, compared the experience of listening to *Venice* to viewing from a distance Monet's weather and light studies:

The longer the gaze is maintained, the more the colours vibrate and the forms shimmer between abstraction and figuration. The lack of any form of overt rhythmic instrumentation further underlines this impression, causing the music to float like a mirage on apparition.

(Buttimer 2004)

These words bring us back to the concept of 'sonic hauntology' – looking for something which cannot be properly recollected and has probably never existed, yet colours what we feel and think.

The opening track, aptly titled ‘Rivers of Sand’, comes across as a search of melody through a wave of noise. as if trying to look for a lost piece of jewellery in the ‘rivers of sand’. Like moving through sand can be pleasant, even if frustrating, so the noise on this track is seductive. The outstanding tracks are ‘Circassian’ and ‘Transit’. ‘Circassian’

drowns in loud, slightly out-of-tune power chords, each of which leads a long and happy life after the initial strum. The string reverberations multiply and mutate endlessly, making it possible to imagine cathedrals, a jet airplane passing through billowy clouds at 500mph, or the volatile racket of a tropical storm.

(Richardson 2004)

‘Transit’ stands out because it is not an instrumental piece but as a song performed by David Sylvian, with whom Fennesz collaborated on another occasion. Remarkable is not only the fact that one finds a song on a record of an artist who normally shuns this form, but that this song is not in the spirit of electronic music. Sylvian’s voice sounds very clear. It is not processed and completely dominates the clicks and cuts heard in the background, perhaps hinting at the respect in which Fennesz holds his English colleague. What is also remarkable are the lyrics, which can be interpreted as those of a love song, dedicated to a dying, perhaps Christian Europe, even though the title of this track contains less pathos than the lyrics:

To wonder why of Europe
 Say your goodbyes to Europe
 Swallow the lie of Europe
 Our shared history dies with Europe

(follow me, won’t you follow me?)

A future’s hinting at itself
 Do you fear what I fear?
 All those names of ancestry
 Too gentle for the stones they bear

The cover of *Black Sea* shows a shot of an industrial skyline across a filthy-bottomed straight at low tide. The image and title thus foretell a darker content. This proves right – the music is darker, heavier and less melodic. One thinks about winter rather than summer and, not surprisingly, one of the tracks, ‘Perfume for Winter’, has *winter* in its title. The sounds last longer, and the tracks are also longer, with the opening, ‘Black Sea’, being over ten minutes long. Moreover, the transitions between tracks are smooth. This affords this record the feel of a symphony or church music, as if the composer managed to hide the whole orchestra in his laptop. The track which stands out is ‘Glide’. As one reviewer noted, it ‘builds up an incredible swell of sound, that buzzes to an orchestral crescendo, until it

breaks into a tidal wave of near silence, which washes off the coast of a Black Sea' (Headphone Commute 2008). Or, to put it differently, it sounds like church music played in a noisy factory located on the beach. It testifies to Fennesz's talent that he manages to merge seamlessly these various sources of music, as if to demonstrate that, although we tend to separate nature, culture and spirituality, in our heads or souls, they are united.

***Bécs* (2014)**

While much connects *Bécs* to the two records described previously, it deserves a special section for a number of reasons. First, it is a comeback album for Fennesz, marking his return to Vienna after a period of living in Paris, to the (Editions) Mego, after collaborating with other record companies and, in some measure, to the sound of *Endless Summer*, which brought him greatest international renown. Through returning to Mego, Fennesz also returned to Tina Frank as designer of the record's cover. The image created by Frank is quite abstract, showing overlapping triangles of different colours. The effect is of multiple refraction, which can be regarded as a visual metaphor for the music in which Fennesz and Mego specialises. It also brings to mind the Haas House, a commercial building in Vienna opposite St Stephan's Cathedral, designed by Viennese architect Hans Hollein, one of the leading exponents of postmodern design in Europe, whose

form echoed the shape of the Roman fort which once stood on the site. With large mirrored glass sections across the facade, a corner of the building was designed to cantilever out over a subway station, creating an effective divide between two public spaces. It is regularly criticised for jarring with Vienna's traditional architectural style.

(Winston 2014)

The very word *jarring* is suitable to Fennesz's compositions because – as was mentioned already – he is not afraid to jar. Hence, the cover foretells the work in which tradition will be present but treated through a filter. The title of the record, *Bécs*, which means 'Vienna' in Hungarian, suggests that Vienna will be looked at from a distance. As with all instrumental music, it is difficult to say whether and how the music reflects the place, but the very fact of acknowledging his Austrian heritage is unique among Viennese electronic musicians.

The music brings to mind *Endless Summer* because it is melodic and exuberant. But there are also differences. The pieces on *Bécs* are longer and the transition between them is smoother, making the record sound like a symphony. While *Endless Summer* brings to mind exterior, beaches and waves, many of the tracks on *Bécs* belong to an interior, perhaps a cathedral, with its elevated mood and special acoustic, allowing the sounds to reverberate forever. On some tracks, such as 'Sav', we even hear something like church bells, although such bells are most likely conjured by a modular synthesiser. The titular track, 'Bécs', offers a perfect synthesis of harmony and glitch. Glitch never breaks the melody; it creates

it. Mark Richardson noted, ‘Rather than serving as texture, the strummed guitars play changes to accompany melodies. The drones and fractured processing are twinkly and bright, instead of dour and foreboding’ (Richardson 2014b). The record also stands out because it sounds more acoustic – ‘possibly the most naked acoustic playing to appear on a Fennesz record, as processing seems to cling to random notes like a burr before being flicked off with the next note’ (ibid.).

While *Bécs* scores highly on the scale of perfection, it fares less well against the criterion of innovation. Again, to quote Richardson,

Fennesz once illuminated the beauty of a digitally scrambled memory, but “Bécs” is a *memory* of a digitally scrambled memory. So while there’s something appealingly meta about returning to a sound that was so suggestive of experimental electronic music 13 years ago, there’s also just the *slightest* hint of surrender in the proposition. If electronic music in this vein is generally expected to push things forward, resurrecting a style from over a decade ago makes you wonder about motivation. But that’s an analytical judgement rather than an aesthetic one, because the music on “Bécs” is often gorgeous. (ibid.)

Fennesz work on *Bécs* reminds me of David Hockney, who at some point in his career focused on painting flowers, simply because of their beauty and the pleasure the pictures of flowers give to the people who look at them. Vienna is beautiful too, and this record can be regarded as a monument to its charms.