

## Aphex Twin – A Topic Analysis

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Music analysis is most often applied to works from the Western classical tradition, but the same tools can offer fresh perspectives when turned toward alternative and experimental genres. In this article, I explore how topic analysis – a method that identifies stylistic markers or "musical codes" – can be used to examine the work of Aphex Twin, an artist whose music often feels as though it comes from another world entirely.

Aphex Twin's compositions can seem to be difficult to define, yet they share similarities in sound, rhythm, and texture. By analyzing selected topics that emerge from his music, I hope to show how even unconventional works can be described through classical analytical techniques.

Classical analysis traditionally focuses on music from the past centuries, but its methods can also be applied to more recent and alternative genres. Let's consider so-called topic analysis in this respect.

*Topics are conventional musical figures or styles that function as signs. Their meanings derive from social associations or generic conventions.<sup>1</sup>*

Using this method is like identifying the musical "code" or stylistic marker. It refers to a particular genre, setting, or emotion that listeners might recognize. This can be especially useful for contextualizing some music or even shedding light on one's own compositions.

I thought it could be interesting to try this method on a genre that music analysis is not commonly used for.

*The Holy Grail for a music fan, I think, is to hear music from another planet, which has not been influenced by us whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>*

Attempting to analyze Aphex Twin using classical music analysis might be like trying to open a banana with a bottle opener – what's the point? Is there a point? For composers or producers, it could be an amusing experiment or perhaps a way to shed light on his compositional

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<sup>1</sup> Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 1991, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sherburne, "Strange Visitor: A Conversation with Aphex Twin," *Pitchfork*, September 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/9506-strange-visitor-a-conversation-with-aphex-twin/>.

approach while drawing connections to other musical ideas. Some writers have also approached Aphex Twin's work through a more classical or formal analytical methods, highlighting connections to other musical ideas, as explored in the *Lyon Papers* article on Aphex Twin.<sup>3</sup>

According to Wikipedia<sup>4</sup>, Aphex Twin has released around 55 albums and EPs under various monikers. He is a music factory and in 2015 he uploaded around several hundred additional tracks to SoundCloud saying afterwards:

*I've got all this music and I thought if I died what the fuck would my kids do? What would my wife do? They'd get really stressed out and they wouldn't know what to do with it all. So I just thought I'd give it away, then they don't have to think about it.*<sup>5</sup>

He has stated that he doesn't really know music theory or music notation, which makes it even more interesting to examine his work through a classical lens.<sup>6</sup>

Kofi Agawu defines topics in relation to music in the following way:

*Topics may enable an account of the form or inner dynamic of a work, its expressive stance, or even its structure. The use of identical or similar topics within or between works may provide insight into a work's strategy or larger aspects of style. And the shapes of individual topics may enhance appreciation of the sonic quality of a given work and the nature of a composer's rhetoric.*<sup>7</sup>

## POSSIBLE TOPICS IN APHEX TWIN'S MUSIC

With this outline by Agawu in mind I started mapping out some topics in Aphex Twin's music. Many of these are well known, such as IDM that was likely first coined in 1992 in regard to Warp Records<sup>8</sup>, but some are topics I made up and feel could serve to describe his music (for example non-theory-based-compositions, simple complexity and disturbing textures to name a few). This list could certainly be much longer, but I've chosen to highlight a few and give further details and context that I find particularly useful.

- Ambient
- Sampling
- IDM

<sup>3</sup> Eric Lyon, "The Music of Aphex Twin," *LyonPapers*, Virginia Tech, <https://disis.music.vt.edu/eric/LyonPapers/AphexTwin/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Aphex Twin," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphex\\_Twin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphex_Twin).

<sup>5</sup> "Aphex Twin SoundCloud demos," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphex\\_Twin\\_SoundCloud\\_demos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphex_Twin_SoundCloud_demos).

<sup>6</sup> "Inside The Mind Of Aphex Twin | Mixmag Originals," YouTube, uploaded by Mixmag, 18.08.2018, <https://youtu.be/Mj8YnZ-1DEo>.

<sup>7</sup> Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>8</sup> "Intelligent Dance Music," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 27, 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligent\\_dance\\_music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligent_dance_music).

- Weird sounds vs. melody
- Disturbing textures
- Speed
- Inventiveness
- 90s electronica
- Analog synths
- Jungle
- “Simple complexity”
- Non-theory-based compositions
- Sound-focused
- Intuition-based composition
- Dance elements
- Glitch music
- Prepared piano
- Simple, haunting melodies
- Rhythms doubling in speed at the end of a beat
- “SATB” layering

#### SIMPLE COMPLEXITY

I find this concept to be central to electronic music, especially in the genre IDM or intelligent dance music. The overlaying melodies are often very simple with few notes and repetitive, but the rhythms and basslines can be very complex with unusual time signatures, irregular beats, and shifting patterns. Examples of this are many such as „*Omgjyja – Switch 7*“ from the album *Drukqs* (example 1). This track is from an album that is partly acoustic, using prepared piano and partly purely electronic. In this track there is a subtle simple melody with a fast, disturbing, complex rhythm that goes through a lot of sonic morphing and does not stay the same for long periods of time.



Example 1: *Omgjyja*<sup>9</sup> // Example 2: *I wish you could talk*<sup>10</sup> // Example 3: *Etchogon*<sup>11</sup>

To give some context we might mention that a similar use of this topic can be heard in many tracks by Squarepusher, including the track „*I wish you could talk*“ where the artist masterfully manipulates one of the most used sampled drum break the „Amen break“<sup>12</sup> where a simple melody repeats itself (example 2).

Another song that could be linked to this concept is the track *Etchogon* by Autechre. Where the

<sup>9</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5XgWTzM9N81tXJH7cFWkba>

<sup>10</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2Nho8rhto2Lxxoc7Eulo2g>

<sup>11</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/7hcleCkqwHNxODWNUEVIKf>

<sup>12</sup> "Amen Break," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 27, 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amen\\_break](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amen_break).

focus clearly is on the sound instead of melody but in the end of the track, there appears a clear simple melody which is layered on a more complex modular rhythm (example 3).

#### AMBIENT

The concept 'ambient' was coined by Brian Eno in 1978 with his album *Music for Airports* though he was not the first to make this kind of music. Ambient music is often unobtrusive, focusing on textures rather than structure, atmospheric and slow-paced.<sup>13</sup> Aphex Twin's *Selected Ambient Works 85–92* and *Volume II* are iconic albums in this genre. They feature atmospheric textures recorded to poor quality tape using sampler, synths and a ZX Spectrum microcomputer.<sup>14</sup>

These albums are some of the most influential ambient albums in music history.<sup>15</sup>

#### PREPARED PIANO

Inspired by John Cage<sup>16</sup>, Aphex Twin used prepared piano extensively on *Drukqs* (2001). The result is a collection of beautiful, delicate miniatures that combine classical technique with experimental sound design. The album features many beautiful short piano pieces inspired by Erik Satie, his favorite piano composer.<sup>17</sup> One of the most played piano pieces on Spotify (145.275.350 times October 2022) is actually from this album called *Avril 14th* which is a purely piano based piece but is played on a midi controlled Disklavier piano where you can clearly hear the clicking of the mechanism (example 4). Another track from that same album using prepared piano and the Disklavier is the track *Jynweythek* (example 5)

Another artist that has gone into similar directions and seems to be influenced by Aphex Twin is Kelly Moran (example 6), a pianist that uses prepared piano and electronics in her music.



Example 4: Avril 14th<sup>18</sup> // Example 5: Jynweythek<sup>19</sup> // Example 6: Helix - Edit<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Ambient Music," *Wikipedia*, last modified April 27, 2025,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambient\\_music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambient_music).

<sup>14</sup> John O'Connell, "Aphex Twin, The Face Magazine (October 2001)," *Lantern Chronicle*, September 9, 2023, <https://lanternchronicle.wordpress.com/2023/09/09/aphex-twin-face-magazine-october-2001/>.

<sup>15</sup> "The 50 Best Ambient Albums of All Time," *Pitchfork*, September 26, 2016,

<https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9948-the-50-best-ambient-albums-of-all-time/>.

<sup>16</sup> Heiko Hoffmann, "Aphex Twin Interview," *AphexTwin.nu*, September 1, 2001,

[https://www.aphextwin.nu/images/interviewsarticles/afx\\_interview\\_by\\_heiko.pdf](https://www.aphextwin.nu/images/interviewsarticles/afx_interview_by_heiko.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Heiko Hoffmann, "Aphex Twin Interview," *AphexTwin.nu*, September 1, 2001,

[https://www.aphextwin.nu/images/interviewsarticles/afx\\_interview\\_by\\_heiko.pdf](https://www.aphextwin.nu/images/interviewsarticles/afx_interview_by_heiko.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2MZSXhq4XDJWu6coGoXX1V>

<sup>19</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/3I0rWmF86CwQpajoZjkXtG>

<sup>20</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/4rv3UTtKes3ICbrUAV3XWY>

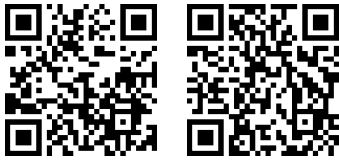
## NON-THEORY-BASED COMPOSITION

Aphex Twin has claimed not to know traditional music theory or how to read music. He even said that he had never been to a classical concert before collaborating with the Remote Orchestra in 2011.<sup>21</sup>

*"I don't read music or write music, like I've never learned it, I don't want to, I'm not interested in it and I don't need to know it for what I do"*<sup>22</sup>

This is a common theme among electronic artists where people attracted to sound or producer techniques are drawn into electronic music with no prior theoretic knowledge, of course, this is not always the case, but it is common. It is interesting that one of the greatest electronic musicians says he does not really know music theory, which he clearly does to some degree, based on listening to his music.

Examples of Icelandic music that seem to be influenced by Aphex Twin and share similar things regarding music theory knowledge, are the Icelandic forefront electronic artists Skurken (example 7)<sup>23</sup> and Futuregrapher (example 8) with their multi-genre music compositions.<sup>24</sup>



Example 7: Sunrise<sup>25</sup> // Example 8: Grænar baunir<sup>26</sup>

## IDM (INTELLIGENT DANCE MUSIC)

A genre that emerged in the early '90s, IDM is characterized by experimentation over adherence to genre rules. Examples are artists like Aphex Twin, Autechre, Squarepusher and others that explore complex rhythms, unusual timbres, and abstract forms. Despite rejecting the label, these artists helped define a style that balances danceability with a so-called intelligent approach to dance music.

*"I just think it's really funny to have terms like that. It's basically saying 'this is intelligent and everything else is STUPID.' It's really nasty to everyone else's music. (laughs) It makes me laugh, things like that. I don't use names. I just say*

<sup>21</sup> Zoë Blade, "Aphex Twin Guide," *Zoë Blade's Notebook*, accessed April 27, 2025, [https://notebook.zoeblade.com/Aphex\\_Twin\\_guide.html](https://notebook.zoeblade.com/Aphex_Twin_guide.html).

<sup>22</sup> "Aphex Twin - Remote Orchestra Interview (2011)" *YouTube*, published by [hexagon calx](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRO_k33IK4w), 16.04.22 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRO\\_k33IK4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRO_k33IK4w).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Jóhann Ómarsson, April 30, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Demurtas, "Making Of An Artist: Árni Grétar Jóhannesson. AKA Futuregrapher," *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, July 17, 2017, <https://grapevine.is/icelandic-culture/2017/07/17/making-of-an-artist-arni-gretar-johannesson-aka-futuregrapher/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/77xXrYkXmndPGjKkOJomGI>

<sup>26</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/album/2odXxxTlvneCajXCMiQ0Jy>

*that I like something or I don't.*<sup>27</sup>

#### SPEED

Many Aphex Twin tracks feature high-speed tempos and complex drum programming, often categorized as 'drill and bass'. Examples of these are: Aphex Twin's song *girl/boy* (example 9) and *Carn Marth* (example 10); Squarepusher's song *Tundra* (example 11) and *Acroyear2* by Autechre (example 12).



Example 9: *Girl/Boy*<sup>28</sup> // Example 10: *Carn Marth*<sup>29</sup> // Example 11: *Tundra*<sup>30</sup> // Example 12: *Acroyear2*<sup>31</sup>

#### ANALOG SYNTHS

The most prominent topic in Aphex Twin's music may be said to be the use of analog synths. When he started using computers in the 80s/90s they were limited, he had an 8-bit computer so the sounds of analog synths is common in his music. This is something that is a vital part of the soundscape many electronic musicians throughout history. As an example he used EMS Synthi AKS synth on *Selected Ambient Works Volume 2* track #23 (example 13). Other pieces of gear he has used are JH-Matrix FX, Roland ProMars Compuphonic and EML 101.<sup>32</sup>



Example 13: #23<sup>33</sup>

#### DISTURBING

This topic relates to the use of sound to shock or be unpleasant in some way. Maybe not always intentional. This is apparent in the song *Come to Daddy* which could be defined as horror electronica. (example 14) But this topic can be found in many songs across his catalogue where he uses sounds that are harsh or commonly viewed as disturbing.

Other artists to use similar methods are Autechre and their song *Second Bad Vilbel* (example 15).

<sup>27</sup> "Aphex Twin," *Perfect Sound Forever*, 1997, <https://www.furious.com/perfect/aphextwin.html>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/33ccBrEr6MniK1HgLT4z1>

<sup>29</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/0BShm4IqnSq5t13VOmP5AK>

<sup>30</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/5iMBUDYYgM8kb1nqROVhuV>

<sup>31</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/0YxgETKHavjFYMws5jZ9dw>

<sup>32</sup> WhatGear. "Aphex Twin: Gear, Instruments & Studio Setup." *WhatGear*. Accessed April 30, 2025. <https://whatgear.com/pro/aphex-twin>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/71OgnpBuG9vJc1TWRfJHua>



Example 14: Come to Daddy<sup>34</sup> // Example 15: Second Bad Vibel<sup>35</sup>

SOUND-FOCUSED

As with electronic music in general Aphex twin is more sound focused than melody focused, even though he often makes beautiful melodies he seems to be clearly more interested in making interesting sounds. This is a common topic for electronic musicians in general where they often claim to focus more on sound design than composing melodies.

*“I can listen to a single drum beat for hours sometimes and just get into rhythms and things. I mean, not all of my stuff has a tune, some of it is just sounds. It's sounds that I'm obsessed with and the tune comes later, if it comes at all.”<sup>36</sup>*

FOUR-PART TEXTURE (SATB-STYLE LAYERING)

His tracks often consist of four main layers: a beat, a bassline, and two melodic or textural elements. Though these components may evolve, the overall texture remains clear and balanced. This structure, reminiscent of classical SATB writing, is repurposed here in an electronic context, often with significant manipulation over time.

Examples of this are: *Tamphex* (example 16), *#3* (example 17), and *Alberto Balsam* (example 18)



Example 16: Tamphex<sup>37</sup> // Example 17: #3<sup>38</sup> // Example 18: Alberto Balsam<sup>39</sup>

CONCLUSION

Having explored ten possible topics that help define Aphex Twin’s music, I want to highlight the practical implications of this method. While music analysis might seem academic or distant from practice, it can be incredibly useful—even in the context of experimental electronic music.

<sup>34</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/53T0V3jTJDs3klqwvlqspI>

<sup>35</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/6IOIjAiwta1b4r2mVQ5leS>

<sup>36</sup> “Aphex Twin Interview: Future Music 1994.” *Aphex Twin Community*. Accessed April 30, 2025.

<https://www.aphextwin.nu/learn/98136272124607.shtml>.

<sup>37</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2RTCS89iu0CfiriZVNC3ey>

<sup>38</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/2Bc4llhjBW77I552RgA3L>

<sup>39</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/track/21Phj46KeUHOWyZW9A9b7P>

With that in mind, I composed a piece using all these topics (except prepared piano): *Wntounce Wime* (2022) (example 19)

At the same time as I think this method is useful for musicians trying to understand different types of music and how it is composed it also feels a bit wrong to try to analyze Aphex Twin's music especially when he himself says that electronic musicians really don't discuss their music, it's abstract: "It kinda undermines it when you start talking about it".<sup>40</sup>



Example 19: *Wntounce wime*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Aphex Twin on the nature of electronic music. *YouTube*, published by Dennis B., 09.12.17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UUsHrDKNH0>.

<sup>41</sup> [https://portagency.disco.ac/track-new/150372997/play?stream\\_only=1&user\\_id=182134&signature=qGII\\_pK1kIQ486FLU-OuvAgdNvms%3AKNjPxsBG](https://portagency.disco.ac/track-new/150372997/play?stream_only=1&user_id=182134&signature=qGII_pK1kIQ486FLU-OuvAgdNvms%3AKNjPxsBG)