

Course title:	Berlin: Music and Sound in the Digital Age
Instructor:	Kim Feser
Email address:	feser@zedat.fu-berlin.de
Track:	B-Track
Language of instruction:	English
Prerequisites:	Students should be able to speak and read English at the upper intermediate level (B2) or higher.
Contact hours:	48 (6 per day)
ECTS-Credits:	5

Course description

The course is dedicated to contemporary developments in music and sound in the midst of digital culture. The specific conditions in Berlin will be examined in relation to other cities around the world – especially those in which the course participants live – as well as to global networking.

Current texts from the fields of cultural studies, musicology, sound studies, and urbanism will be discussed. We will visit sites of music production and consumption in Berlin, and examine local music cultural phenomena and the spectrum of urban sounds. The course will thus cover the broad spectrum of music and sound, with a particular focus on electronic music (from techno and house to experimental electronica) for which Berlin is especially known, but also on sound art (in galleries or online), on interactive sounds (computer games), and on the acoustics of the built environment and urban noise.

In many ways, Berlin is a center for contemporary electronic music. This is not least due to the strong connection between technological and aesthetic developments. Nightclubs, such as the Berghain, have dedicated sound systems, which allow a specific acoustic experience and encourage nightlong dancing and partying. Berlin-based companies such as Ableton and Native Instruments are global leaders in their music software. The dominance of digital 'virtual' technology is at the same time characterized by an increasing focus on the haptic dimension. Software companies have made strong efforts over the past years to develop their own hardware controllers for their computer programs in order to better control musical processes manually.

Based on such phenomena, the course will explore the relationship between aesthetic trends and technological developments with the focus on the cultural and economic conditions in Berlin. What makes Berlin a magnet not only for thrill-seeking club-goers, but also for DJs, musicians, producers and developers? How does this relate to the recent past of Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall, especially given the gentrification processes? Berlin's creative scene is internationally networked and its conditions can only be understood in a global context. But what kind of digital inequality exists, locally and globally? Furthermore, we discuss the extent to which some popular myths, especially about the early Berlin techno days, neglect issues of diversity – for example, in relation to the partying crowd and influential personalities.

Beyond the Berlin perspective, the course examines the current conditions of production and consumption as well as the performance and distribution of music. How do streaming services with their algorithmic recommendation systems influence listening to music? What is

the impact of the dynamic development of artificial intelligence in the field of music? What is changing in music culture through new ways of sampling, remixing, and interactive sound in video games? What are opposing trends?

A special focus of the course is on the borderlands and intersections of music, sound art and environmental sounds.

In addition to the joint discussion of texts, excursions also provide an opportunity for an exchange with proven experts in the course subject areas.

At the end of the course, the participants can elaborate on and present a topic (either alone or in a group) of their choice in the context of the general list of topics on the course.

Student Profile

This course is intended for students of any disciplines. No prior music and technology background is required. The course aims to provide an insight into the relationship between aesthetic, social and technical developments regarding music and sound in the digital age, with a special focus on the conditions in Berlin in relation to other cities. It also examines current production methods of electronic music, but does not teach the specific programming or composing of music.

Prerequisites

None

Required language skills

The language of instruction is English. Language proficiency on an advanced Intermediate level (Mittelstufe II) is a prerequisite for participation. For orientation purposes, you can assess your language skills here (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168045bb52>

Course requirements

- 1. Active participation**
The topics will be jointly developed within the course. Continuous involvement in the discussions is a prerequisite for successful participation in the course. Preparatory reading of texts between the course days is another important requirement.
- 2. Course schedule and excursions**
The course will take place on Tuesdays and Fridays and includes excursions within Berlin.
- 3. Presentation with handouts**
Each student will prepare a topic for a discussion by critically presenting the core content of a text in a presentation (with a handout) and working out specific aspects for the joint discussion.
- 4. Course presentation**
In the last week of the course, the students will present a topic of their choice in the context of the list of topics on the course, with written essay (cooperation of several students presenting similar topics is possible, if individual parts are clear).

Grading

Active participation: 40%

Presentation of a text as input for joint discussion (with handout): 20%

Presentation of a chosen topic at the end of the course (with written essay): 40%

List of References

The list of references will be made available in a digital course reader.

Course schedule

Date	Program*
Tuesday, July 23, 2024	<p>An introduction into the main topic by the instructor and joint discussion of fundamental aspects, which will be addressed in detail throughout the course:</p> <p>Term 'digital age'. – Distinction between analog/digital. – Music and sound.</p> <p>Berlin as a center of electronic music and as a magnet for tourists and artists from all over the globe. – Significance of the recent past of Berlin since the fall of the Wall.</p>
Friday, July 26, 2024	<p>An inquiry into the variety of discourses about 'analog' and 'digital': Is there a 'digital beauty'? Is there 'analog' aesthetics? – An inquiry into the correlation of ideas about 'analog' and 'digital' phenomena. – The technical distinction between 'analog' and 'digital' signal paths.</p> <p><i>Hands on Hardware: Modular Sound Synthesis (joint experimental practice)</i></p>
Tuesday, July 30, 2024	<p>Is there a 'sound of Berlin'? Is there a connection between the music and the city's environmental sounds and noise? What are urban conditions for musical creativity and technical development? What role do processes of gentrification play in Berlin?</p> <p>— <i>An excursion to a small dynamic company (on the edge of a gentrified neighborhood of Berlin) developing special hardware for the production of electronic music*</i></p> <p>— <i>Investigation: Spectrum of urban sounds †</i></p>

<p>Friday, August 2, 2024</p>	<p>The history of 'analog' and 'digital' music devices and sound-recording media. – Significance for the music culture.</p> <p>Laptop music and the 'return' of hardware interface. On the importance of manual intervention in computer-based musical processes.</p> <p>— <i>An excursion to a global manufacturer of software and dedicated hardware for the production of electronic music in Berlin*</i></p>
<p>Tuesday, August 6, 2024</p>	<p>Developments in the distribution and consumption of music: streaming services, blogs and self-promotion.</p> <p>On the relationship between technical developments and new musical trends: from sampling, remixing and mashup through to interactive music and sound in video games. The challenge of AI.</p> <p>— <i>Excursion: Artist talk with a Berlin producer/musician about sound aesthetics and social conditions</i></p>
<p>Friday, August 9, 2024</p>	<p>What is sound art? How blurred are the boundaries of media art? On the past and current trends in Berlin.</p> <p>— <i>An excursion to a sound art gallery*</i></p>
<p>Tuesday, August 13, 2024</p>	<p>Final papers of the participants: Presentation and discussion</p>
<p>Friday, August 16, 2024</p>	<p>Final papers of the participants: Presentation and discussion</p>

*Field trips are subject to change depending on the availability of appointments and speakers. On field trip days, class hours may be adjusted.