

Thesis proposal

The Formal Paradigms of Trance and House Music:
Breakdowns, Buildups and Anthems

This thesis will focus on trance and house music, subgenres within electronic dance music (EDM), and particularly on the formal paradigm of breakdown, buildup and anthem. Different terms are sometimes used instead of breakdown, buildup and anthem. Breakdown will sometimes be substituted with ‘break,’ buildup is sometimes just called the ‘build,’ and the anthem is often referred to as the ‘arrival’ or ‘drop.’ The term ‘arrival’ shows in particular that EDM fans are aware that the key feature of the music is about the large scale control of tension and release points. When the music is played live, it is often the ‘drop’ that makes the fans cheer the most. Trance and house composers use compositional tools to create climactic points of tension and release within this breakdown/buildup/anthem format. These terms are so common that most fans of EDM readily utilize this language.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the nature of tension and release within the structure of breakdown/buildup/anthem by demonstrating first how common techniques such as: snare drum rolls, layering, sequencing, dynamics and texture create conventional procedures that produce a sense of tension and relaxation and help define the formal boundaries of the music. Then the thesis will identify how different artists toy with the conventions to both stretch the limits of the breakdown/buildup/anthem form and create complex and drawn out moments of tension and relaxation. The various nuances and techniques (such as false bass drum arrivals or extended arrival points) that are used to create these places of tension and relaxation will be the bulk of analysis. Finally, the

thesis will then reveal how even though many trance and house songs can be seen through the traditional form of popular song (verse, chorus and bridge), these paradigms create a separate sense of formal boundaries which redefine the large scale structure of the music.

This thesis originates from a concern that scholarly research on EDM has largely ignored the music itself. This music is important to study since it contains previously unseen approaches and procedures to tension and release and to form in popular music. I believe that these systems can also bring a new light to how we view other music—both other genres of popular music *and* the standard canon of “classical” music.

Looking to previous research, one finds that some of the publications approach EDM mainly from a gender/sexuality viewpoint (Bradby 1993, Fritz 1999, Amico 2001, Loza 2001). More frequently used than a gender/sexuality view are the studies taken by others (Langlois 1992, Hadley 1993, Gore 1997, Hutson 1999, McLeod 2001, Maira 2003, Tjora 2009) where EDM is discussed through an ethnomusicological lens that focuses on the other aspects associated with EDM culture and practice. The main text that deals with EDM from a theorist’s perspective is Mark Butler’s, *Unlocking the Groove* (2006)¹.

Butler provides a general theoretical outline for EDM as a whole. He explains that he wishes for the ideas in his book to be the launch point for further analytical study in the field. “It is my hope that these factors *will* be dealt with in greater detail as the study of EDM as music develops and that the ideas put forth here will prove useful in this regard.”² Not surprisingly, his book is too small in scope to properly tackle the many

¹ Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

² *Ibid*, p. 21.

subgenres within EDM, and as a result sometimes leaves those genres untouched or not properly addressed. Two genres in particular, trance and house, I felt deserved closer study from that given in Butler's book.

Butler's book addresses the music from several aspects, mostly related to rhythm. He mostly uses hypermeter to explain meter and form in EDM. It is in this discussion of form that I will branch off from Butler's approach. First it is important to note that Butler's ideas are somewhat similar to a 2004 article by Mark Spicer entitled "Accumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music." In it Spicer provides several excellent examples of the formal paradigm of 'accumulation' to demonstrate how, "if we examine pop-rock songs more closely, we can often find their composers employing techniques of considerable sophistication in order to create interesting and unique formal structures that transcend these predictable boundaries."³

Similar to Spicer's ideas, Butler's discussion of form mostly shows how layering, sequencing, and textural aspects help to define formal boundaries within EDM. Butler provides a sufficient overview for EDM, but his look at trance music is relatively short and ineffective. This is the entirety of Butler's discussion of form in trance:

In "Communication," the prototypical form is strikingly obvious. In fact, such dramatically articulated formal features are a hallmark of its genre, which is trance. Trance and related genres such as progressive house typically feature especially climatic builds, in which devices such as snare drum rolls (of which the diminution of snare drum 3a in this track is a rather regimented example) and crescendo create dramatic increases in intensity. In fact, the obviousness of these characteristics is a major point of criticism for those who do not like the genre—a group that includes many techno fans.⁴

As a response of Butler's hope that the study of EDM could be dealt with in greater detail, this is where I aim to depart from Butler's studies. The issue with Butler's

³ Mark Spicer, "Accumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 30.

⁴ Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006, 226.

trance analysis is that it seems to provide only a general overview of ‘characteristics’ but only one true mention of a real device (the snare drum roll). The rest seems to be more of a qualitative commentary on the genre itself. Given Spicer’s quote that if we study the examples in more detail we can find techniques of considerable sophistication, I feel there is a lot of room to branch off of from both Spicer’s and Butler’s publications.

With Butler having mentioned that some view trance music as one of the most straightforward and therefore least flexible genres in EDM in regards to form, I hope to conclude that not only is the trance genre highly flexible, but that it is also capable of producing greatly climactic musical moments. The various aspects of snare drum rolls, layering, sequencing, dynamics and texture will all demonstrate the complex nuance and technique that goes into the formal paradigms in trance music. The thesis will draw upon a range of individual examples from trance and house artists such as Tiësto, Armin van Buuren, Paul van Dyk, Robert Miles, Above & Beyond, Darren Tate, Ferry Corsten, Johan Gielen, ATB, Benassi Bros, DJ Sammy, and Paul Oakenfold.

Because there is no sheet music or score to the works this thesis will cover, everything will be notated from ‘ear.’ Some of the notational style will be drawn from Butler, who created several useful systems of notation for EDM. Analysis will look at: how additions and subtractions in layering creates or removes tension, how various percussion riffs are signals that either add or remove tension, how percussion is one of the strongest managers of formal boundaries, how aspects of sequencing create predictable hypermeter that has a dramatic effect when changed or broken, how dynamics are used to define formal boundaries and create tension, and how texture contributes to tension and a sense of arrival.

Now I will provide an example of analysis which shows a song that employs the “typical” features involved in the breakdown/buildup/anthem form.

In trance and house music, the breakdown/build/anthem form originated from early experiments in disco. DJs of disco music sought to string together music to create longer and longer sections of danceable music. Trance and house music grew out of this tradition of creating danceable music. In this music, as many have noted, the bass drum is the key force behind the dancing. The breakdown/build/anthem form developed as a way of further organizing the dancing. The form is about creating section of music without the bass drum to give the dancers a short break and then to gradually bring the bass drum back in a climactic moment that is designed to produce enough excitement to start dancing again.

The breakdown is named as such because it is the point in music where the most powerful formal defining force, the bass drum, is often removed from the texture. Along with the bass drum, the typical plan is for the rest of the percussion to fall silent as well. Often with the simplest examples, the breakdown becomes blurred with the buildup phase and is not a separate section.

For most trance and house music, the buildup is designed to bring back the bass drum and, with it, the rest of the vocals, synthesizers, percussion and any other layers. This section is where the tension is created and sustained through the use of gradual layering, increasing dynamics, snare drum rolls and faster rhythmic figures, and changes of texture. These devices dramatize the music and give the listener a clear and powerful sense that the music *must* move forward to a specific goal—similar to the way classical

composers will prolong the dominant to create the need for progression. Thus the buildup is a goal-driven section; it almost never fails to *eventually* reach its goal.

The release of all this tension is the goal and comes at the anthem where the bass drum and the rest of the layers arrive. Because the bass drum is one of the first things composers toy with in the arrival, the clearest way to tell that the arrival has come is when the entire percussion setup is playing regular, repeating rhythms with the addition of melodic phrases. Just as classical composers toy with the expectations of dominant sonorities, composers of trance and house play with the expectation of the anthem. In fact the comparison to dominant prolongation is very appropriate here. In a sense, the anthem is a cadence. Composers toy with the arrival by delaying when it should arrive, masking its arrival, having it “arrive” too early, providing several false arrivals...the same sort of tricks that classical composers tend to do with cadences.

DJ Sammy’s, “Heaven,” provides a highly characteristic example of the features involved in a trance breakdown, buildup, and anthem. “Heaven” has two major breakdown/buildup/anthem sections. Typical of most trance songs, the first section begins at m. 1 (example 1). This is the breakdown area since the percussion ensemble is *tacet*.

Unlike some of the simplest examples, this work also has a differentiation between breakdown and buildup. The delineation occurs at m. 9 when DJ Sammy has the bass, snare, and high hat articulate the downbeat. While it was previously mentioned that the goal of the buildup is the return of the bass drum, it is important to note that this hit of the bass drum is *not* the arrival of the bass drum because the bass drum does not stay present in the texture. However just one hit of the bass drum is enough to provide an

articulation that signals the beginning of the buildup. The other factor that demarcates this change to the buildup is the change of rhythm in the synthesizers. On the downbeat of m. 9, the synthesizers change from a sustained whole note/half note texture to a syncopated more rhythmically active line. This articulation on the downbeat is an extremely common technique which will turn into one of the main devices of nuance in later pieces. Often this articulation is used to define a four-measure bar in hypermeter, which is the case here.

At measure 13, there is another hit from the percussion which continues to outline the four-measure hypermeter. But during the next four measures, DJ Sammy brings in the quintessential technique of the snare drum roll. Mm. 14-6 starts with a crescendoing line of sixteenth-notes which moves to thirty-second notes in m. 16. This line produces a rapid rise in tension—a strong feeling of drive towards the next downbeat of hypermeter (m. 17) with the increase of rhythmic activity and crescendo.

After this snare drum roll, DJ Sammy provides us with exactly what is expected of a typical trance breakdown/buildup/anthem: the anthem. At m. 17, the percussion ensemble settles into the typical groove of “four-on-the-floor” bass drum and the alternating downbeat/offbeat of snare and high hat. This regularity is what releases the tension built up from the previous eight measures. The hypermeter reduction (example 2) shows what 16 bar breakdown/buildups frequently look like in trance.

It is also worth noting that this entire breakdown/buildup/anthem section does *not* correspond with any part of the typical popular song form. The trance form moves right through a chorus introduction and ends in the middle of a bridge section to a verse.

Appendix 1
Musical Examples

Example 1

DJ Sammy, "Heaven," mm. 1-23

$\text{♩} = c. 132$

Breakdown

Snare Drum

High Hat

Bass Drum

Voice

Ba-by you're all that I want when you're ly-ing here - in my arms. My arms. I'm find-ing it hard to be -

Synthesizer 1

Synthesizer 2

Synthesizer 3

Buildup

S. Dr.

H. H.

B. Dr.

lieve we're in heav - en.

Synth 1

Synth 2

Synth 3

Musical score for measures 13-16. The score includes parts for S.Dr., H.H., B.Dr., Synth 1, Synth 2, and Synth 3. The S.Dr. part shows a transition from a single hit at measure 13 to a dense, multi-layered pattern starting at measure 14, with dynamics increasing from *mp* to *ff*. Synth 1 plays a melodic line, Synth 2 plays a bass line with eighth notes, and Synth 3 plays a bass line with quarter notes.

Anthem

Musical score for measures 17-23, titled "Anthem". The score includes parts for S.Dr., H.H., B.Dr., Synth 1, Synth 2, and Synth 3. The S.Dr. part shows a consistent, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Synth 1 plays a melodic line, Synth 2 plays a bass line with eighth notes, and Synth 3 plays a bass line with quarter notes.

Example 2

DJ Sammy, "Heaven" Hypermeter Reduction of Percussion, mm. 1-17

Musical score for measures 1-17, titled "Heaven". The score includes parts for S.Dr., H.H., B.Dr., Synth 1, Synth 2, and Synth 3. The score is divided into sections: Breakdown (measures 1-4), Buildup (measures 5-8, 9-10-12), and Anthem (measures 13-17). The S.Dr. part shows a transition from a single hit at measure 13 to a dense, multi-layered pattern starting at measure 14, with dynamics increasing from *mp* to *ff*.

Appendix 2

Outline

Introduction

Brief history/context

- ~3 pp.

Literature review

- ~5 pp.

Methodology

- ~2 pp.

Part One- Analysis of breakdown/buildup/anthems

Chapter 1- Typical buildup features

- ~ 10 pp.

Chapter 2- Buildups without typical features

- ~17 pp.

Chapter 3- Buildups with false arrivals and other trick features

- ~21 pp.

Part Two- Juxtaposition of breakdown/buildup/anthem form with elements of song form

Chapter 4- Explanation of typical pop song form (verse, chorus, bridge)

- ~3 pp.

Chapter 5- Intersection of trance form with song form

- ~12 pp.

Part Three

Chapter 6- Conclusion

- ~5 pp.

Total ~ 78 pages

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