

THE HOUSE PHENOMENON

MIHAI TELEAGĂ*

Abstract

The most searched, the most highly praised, an art which is most closely related to the human, the musical creation has an unparalleled charm, the irrational craziness and the sublime power to raise the spirit. Irrespective of its genre, music is one of the most convincing methods of globalising the present. In this micro-analysis we shall refer to a relatively new musical genre which has spread over the entire world and which nowadays seems irreplaceable in house music discos and dance clubs.

Keywords: *para-aesthetic, samplers, styles, play list, front house, kitsch, house music artists, paralysing influence.*

I start off with a definition given by Ovidiu Drîmba in his study entitled "History of culture and civilisation". "Culture is an umbrella term which includes the attitudes, acts and works which are limited – as far their genesis, intention, motivation, and purpose are concerned – to the spiritual and intellectual realm. The cultural work and act, as well as the man of culture, seek to fulfill their spiritual and intellectual needs, to discover their own self and the unknown, to explain mysteries and to indulge in beauty. By interacting with the nature, with the human being and the society, they aim to establish neither practical (utilitarian) nor instrumental relationships. On the contrary, they aim to establish a relationship that can enhance communication, facilitate their search as well as their effort to identify with the environment. In this way, the realm of culture belongs to them: the customs and traditions, the religious beliefs and practices, the decorations and diversions, the works which distinguished themselves in fields such as science, philosophy, literature and music, architecture, painting, sculpture, and decorative or applied arts".(Drimba, Ovidiu, 1984)

I have seen that music plays an important part in the sphere of culture and that house music is a subgenre of the kind of commercial music that has flourished over the last 20 years. Throughout this paper, when referring to house music, I shall use more often the phrase "the house phenomenon" because, as Topârceanu used to say, it appeared on the canopy of music "as a tailless comet". Judging by the speed with which it emerged and imposed itself, one might say that it is very likely for it to fade away with the same speed. Nevertheless, this particular type of

* Ph. Ds in Sociologie on "A. I. Cuza" University, Iași, mihaiteleaga@yahoo.com

commercial music genre that I, despite the large number of people who appreciate it, have included it in the category of the para-aesthetic, with the certainty of not being the only one to do that, is very trendy nowadays. In the event that there are cons against my belief, then so much the better as it will give me a chance to debate with people and thus find out more about the musical kitsch of our times or, who knows, maybe I will get “carried away” by the new trends and jump on the bandwagon?

Over the last 20 years, house music has almost entirely replaced dance music in discos all around the world. Properly speaking, it replaced the other music genres which represented a small part of a disco’s programme.

Moreover, young people and even preteens listen to a lot of house music outside the disco, and some of the radio stations include in their programme many hours of house music (Vibe FM, Radio 21, Radio Deea, etc).

Irrespective of its genre, music is one of the most convincing methods of rapid globalisation, a phenomenon which is about to reach its climax in the entire world.

There are few places on earth that remained “untouched” by the Anglo-American globalising music such as pop, rock, house, dance, and hip-hop. There are maybe small areas where, due to restrictions imposed by religion, these globalising elements were forced to enter through the back door, thus preventing the spread of the American “pan-epidemic”. Some fundamentalist groups, who ban all kinds of music genres that are not religious, try to protect the young people, who might, one day, get “infected” with the globalisation virus... Maybe not all of them. However, a great majority will not be able to resist temptation and will find it difficult to deviate from the path the world is following.

For those who try to explain the socio-cultural impact of the music genre we refer to herein, some questions are absolutely natural. What is it more precisely? How did it come to pass? When? What are its bearings? Why is house music now trendy?

We shall try to provide an answer to all these questions so as to gain a better insight into the way it evolved and managed to take over almost the entire dance music market. House music is currently the new trend in music.

It is widely known that in the field of art there have always been nonconformists, rebels who suggested other ways than the traditional ones. Many of them were successful and later on appreciated for their innovative ideas. The evolution of music towards a better or a poorer quality cannot be anticipated or controlled by anyone. It represents the natural evolution of the world towards new, unknown adventures or towards rediscovering and refreshing some older music related ideas. The same thing happened to the music that we nowadays call house music.

Let us see how this music genre evolved. In the mid '70s and towards the beginning of the '80s, a new sound, known as electronic music, sprang to life and was considered sophisticated, bizarre and revolutionary for that time.

The pioneers of the electronic music did not come from Great Britain or America, as most people would have expected, but from Germany and were known as the Kraftwerk (in German, the term refers to a “central heating plant”). The new, revolutionary sound had a great impact on modern pop music genres. What Kraftwerk created in the '70s later came to be known as synthpop, electro, techno, house and nowadays, IDM (intelligent dance music). The influence that the Kraftwerk music had can be compared to that of rock'n'roll in the '50s and '60s or to that of the Beatles.

The Kraftwerk sound combined rhythmical sections with synthesised, pleasant tunes, generally arranged in a classical style, accompanied by simple lyrics, sometimes performed with the help of vocoders or computer devices.

The Moog synthesiser is present in almost all of the band's tunes, endowing the compositions with unique clusters of sounds. At about the same time, in England, a band called “Human League” distinguished itself by using similar ways of expression, thus creating a strange, sophisticated kind of music (i.e. synthpop), which replaced, at the beginning of the '80s, the disco music performed in the European dance clubs. At about the same time, great world musicians distinguished themselves on the world music market, took over the new sound and developed it by making out of electronic music a genre that was going to be more appreciated by the electronic dance music fans.

Some of these records were very appreciated by the audience at that time. One can mention, in this respect, names such as “Vienna”, by Ultravox, in 1980, “Dare”, by Human League, “Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret”, by The Soft Cell, in 1981. The new style was also used by bands such as Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, who are, nowadays, very successful. Let us not forget that in 1982 Vangelis won the Oscar prize for the “Chariots of Fire” soundtrack.

J. M. Jarre, another pioneer of electronic music, released, in the '70s and '80s, a series of albums that were highly appreciated by the audience, such as “La Cage”, “Oxigen”, “Equinoxe”, and, in the '90s, “Rendez-Vous” and “C'est la Vie”.

J. M. Jarre reminds us that his inchoate source of inspiration was engineer Pierre Schaeffer, the father of concrete music (in the '40s and '50s), who used, for the first time, combinations of pre-recorded sounds to replace the traditional system based on the quantified grading of pitches and note lengths.

One cannot forget to mention Rick Wakeman, the great Yes pianist, who composed highly successful electronic music. In the '75s-'76s, it was very trendy to have Rick Wakeman's rather lengthy works in one's personal audio archive, otherwise one would have risked to be considered as unfashionable. Driven by a snobbish attitude, many music addicts used to say they had listened to “Journey to

the center of the Earth” and “King Arthur” or that they were in possession of these records.

It would be normal and fair to mention the contribution made by a series of remarkable musicians such as the Pink Floyd band members, Richard Wright and Manfred Mann(Manfred Mann Group), visionary pianists, who continuously experimented with “underground”, sophisticated sounds. The messages they sometimes conveyed by means of the new, original sounds (in the case of Pink Floyd, for instance) meant, for the great majority of the audience, an invitation to think of drugs, sexual freedom, and anarchy. But one cannot generalise as it would be blasphemy to say that all the Pink Floyd tunes conveyed such messages. Time demonstrated that people of great value have distinguished themselves and opened up new ways of expressing oneself with the help of music, irrespective of the way they began their career in music (for instance, Pink Floyd started their career by giving a concert in an abandoned railway station in a London neighbourhood called Camden Town) or of the way their music was regarded at the time.

The nonconformists, the rebels set new trends in fashion and sometimes, in doing so, they changed the world. If you ever listen to “Wish you were here” or “The mighty Queen”, you might feel a great relief, a caress, and you might as well feel as if you discovered a gateway to the dream realm, where only music can take you.

For the times it was designed for, that music was cumbersome and difficult to grasp, its authors being extremely talented musicians who were looking for new ways to express in the field of music.

In our country, musicians such as Dan Andrei Aldea “Zamolze”; Adrian Enescu, “Camelot”, “Macbeth”, “Omul din La Mancha”, “November dreams”, and Liviu Tudan “Sinestezie”, “Zburătorul”, „Puterea muzicii”, „Leopardul de pe Kilimanjaro” attempted to promote this kind of symphonic rock. Paradoxically, these elaborate, electronic symphonic works led to the arrival of house music, mainly performed in dance music discos.

The house phenomenon imposed itself over the past 20 years as a result of the decrease in the number of classical, pop, rock, rhythm and blues, folk music enthusiasts but also due to the need to replace a great deal of the disco music which was performed in discos and which consisted of, apart from distinctive harmonies and melodic lines, texts, especially love related texts.

Together with the development of house music, towards the end of the 20th century, as well as with the development of information technology and communications around the world, the kind of house music which took over the entire world, was easy to proliferate.

In order to be in keeping with the discourse line of the present study, we shall attempt to define the concept of house music.

It therefore illustrates an electronic musical formula consisting of a strong, constant and monotonous rhythm, usually without text. It however contains a set of

formulae which, in the field of musical instruments (keys, electronic organs, synthesisers), are referred to as style samplers. These “products” (style samplers) are aimed at facilitating the musicians’ work and at compensating for the multitude of instruments an orchestra generally uses. “House music” borrows from the great variety of rhythms that synthesisers comprise only one which has the same speed (approximately 130 beats) and which is based on musical sentences, most of the times very simple phrases which are obsessively repeated (4 to 15 minutes).

Texts occur very rarely and when they do, they usually represent mere leitmotifs following a certain cycle of phrases or sentences exclusively based on drums, percussion, bass, and voice synthesisers. Such phrases are: love tonight, sex tonight. Nowadays there are sequencers which imitate the sounds of nature (wind, outbursts, rain, twitter, voices, howls, horns, engines, noises, etc.) and which, sprinkled throughout the “work”, impress even more the audience addicted to this type of cultural act.

If we are to consider the house phenomenon as an artistic act, as this is what it actually represents, we have to admit that the artistic act in itself may or may not accomplish a set of functions. We cannot say that the affective-cognitive as well as the persuasive functions of house music have not reached their target since this genre is present all around the world, in discos, night clubs, radio stations, etc. When referring to the axiological and the socially formative functions, we will have to admit that any kind of artistic composition motivates the action, the behaviour of the individual, it controls their thinking and encourages them to take action. House music is therefore an artistic act, a creation, a compilation of “musical” ideas whose conveyed messages relate to freedom, sex, and drugs. We then wonder, in this case, does the final, socially formative function make possible the aesthetic, educational, integrating, liberating, and humanising effects? It is widely known that it is easier to persuade people who have a more limited capacity to select and that this is typical of the “mediocre” artists and of large masses of people.

The success of house music and its status as the trendsetter of the 20th century were a fact which was easier to accept compared to other trends from the previous centuries. Moments of highly original creation, such as the renaissance painting, the classical music of the 17th-18th centuries, were not fashionable at that time but managed to set a trend. In our case, the house trend was set in a different way from the other trends due to the very advanced system of communication and to the amazing speed with which information is transmitted. It is possible that, in the future, new revolutionary trends will be set in art and will suddenly be discovered all over the world.

Currently there are no discos in the world without house music. Who justifies this omnipresence? Isn’t it the globalisation that doesn’t forgive anything and anyone?

Z. Bauman, who quotes from Christian Balls and Miller Jenkins, states that “the globalisation is a paradox”, it is extremely advantageous to the few, marginalising or excluding two thirds of the world’s population: “too much for them, not enough for us” (Bauman, Z. 2004).

But since the exception does nothing but confirm the rule, I shall demonstrate that even at my place, a small village with two discos, only 70% of the performed music is house, the rest being represented by a musical genre called “manele”.

We may therefore wonder what the connexion between “manele” and house music might be. I shall try to answer this question by showing the similarities between the so-called “twin genres”.

House music has only one rhythm, the same as in the case of “manele”. House music has simple, silly texts whereas the “manele” have less consistent texts, full of gypsy jargon, and which are as simple and as little intelligent as those of house music.

After such a comparison, we wonder if house music could be included in the category of “manele” and the other way round. A more sarcastic philosopher would say that, in this case, it is a question of “the identity of the impenetrable” since house music and the “manele” have the similar characteristics.

“Finding an answer to this question would be like chasing the wind”, as a great Romanian poet used to say, leading us to the conclusion that both of them could be included in the category of the para-aesthetic. Unfortunately, it is true that they entertain many people while registering a low level of performance from a musical standpoint.

The paralysing influence of globalisation in all fields cannot spare anyone, no matter where one might choose to hide. The globalisation of music is easier to happen now than ever before due to the state of the art techniques used for broadcasting music. In the summer holiday of 2008 I had the chance to undergo a micro-analysis of the way in which house music was propagating in a few European countries. In this respect, I went to discos in cities such as Torino, Milano, Ibiza, Bucharest, Onești, Constanța, and Slănic Moldova. The conclusion is that in all these places house music is the most performed music genre. I can therefore be entitled to name this phenomenon, the “house phenomenon” or even a world phenomenon.

But who are the fans of this genre?

The ones who wander for hours through the house labyrinth and are “attacked” by thousands of decibels are mostly aged between 14 and 22. However, there are also older people who try this fashionable genre for various reasons.

The main players on the “house music battle field” have approximately the same age (14 to 22) and go dancing in compact groups, most of the times not allowing for outsiders to join in. The actual dance moves are usually limited to a few variants that are embraced by the entire group. These consist of a continuous

sway having two to three lateral moves and small steps, coordinated with the ones of the entire group. Some rebellious teens attempt pirouettes, bends, but these distinctive moves are uniform and the same for everyone. When asked why they like house music, they usually say that it helps them relax, that they feel great, as if they had gone into a trance (it is true that there are discos where people smoke cigarettes and exotic herbs which produce a state of ecstasy and help you forget your darkest thoughts, the hard time you might have the next day, the fact that you have nothing to eat or that the next day you have an exam). I believe this is what happens each time you attend such gatherings. I too spent a couple of hours in discos, tried different drinks, but didn't manage to get caught in that "spell". Moreover, I ended up feeling extremely exhausted because of the music being played so loudly and because of it being void of musical essence.

As I have previously mentioned, this genre that is highly regarded by some people is, in my opinion, a musical parody based on drums, bass and synthesizers which, combined together, make up a uniform, monotonous, obsessive, harmonious, simple and very strong signal. These works lack texts and when these occur, they are most of the time simple and clear. It is an invitation to ecstasy, freedom, alcohol, sex, and house music.

What a big difference between R. Wakeman's, J. M. Jarre's and Vangelis' compositions from the '70s and '80s and the house music of our time!!!

Have our children become obsessed with alcohol, drugs, sex and other "elixirs" of life?

I cannot and do not want to believe that the teenagers of our times, having to choose between good and evil, life and death, beautiful and ugly, truth and lie, will only choose the noble, healthy and useful human values that can help people continue their journey to their spiritual ascension, in order to overcome their state of misery, at our expense.

By undergoing an analysis of the house phenomenon, we can easily understand that its evolution in the entire world is similar and is determined by the same causes. It is aimed at the same type of audience, no matter the place where it comes from. We can say that these globalising musical genres such as dance, pop, and hip-hop happened as quick as lightning or meteors, the same as house music came to pass. Below is a representative example, aimed at supporting the previous statements:

I remember that 6 or 7 years ago a Moldavian band called O-Zone, consisting of three handsome young men, came to Romania and a musician from Bucharest composed for them three songs that became great hits: "Dragostea din tei", "De ce plâng chitarele", etc. In Romania these songs were very successful and several months later, the song called "Dragostea din tei" was played in Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland, Japan, and China. I was surprised as well by the evolution of this hit which, in the meantime, was translated into English and Italian. At the same time I realised that the placing of a song at the top of the list is

determined by the generation of young people aged 12 to 18. In Romania, this song was broadcasted by the local radio stations two to six times a day, the reason for broadcasting it so often always being a different one.

Personally, at the beginning, I was sceptical when a friend of mine told me the song was going to become an international hit. After objectively considering what happened, I can say my friend was right. And here is why: the song, considered from a harmonic standpoint, has everything it needs. Moreover, it is simple, touching, its lyrics are easy to remember and do not comprise useless phrases. The lines end in a lot of vowels and onomatopoeia that do not exist in Romanian (the band members are speakers of Russian), such as “maya hi, maya hu, maya ho”. All these elements, backed by a strong and continuous rhythm, have easily penetrated and those who acclaimed it from the very beginning were kids aged 12 to 16. “Dragostea din tei” has a special musicality for us, Romanians, because it makes us think of Ion Creangă’s “Pupăza din tei”, and of his beautiful “Childhood memories”. And in order to be a little sarcastic, I shall say that the kitsch and the mediocre kind of art have more supporters than we think; not only kids aged between 16 and 18. Moreover, the lack of education is the same all around the world and has nothing to do with a nation’s standard of living (see for example the comparison between Switzerland and Romania, Japan and Romania).

Currently, the ones who design this music genre resort to a series of songs from the ‘70s-‘80s, they record them once again and adapt them to the rhythms that are characteristic of house music and add some specific effects of the genre. They also succeed in reminding people from the older generations of the time when these songs were great hits. These songs bring up pleasant memories of their childhood or of the times when they were young. But these songs are also appreciated by the young people of our time, who discover the kind of music their parents and grandparents used to listen to and how beautiful and harmonious this kind of music was.

If a young person aged between 16 and 20 finds himself/herself in the situation of having to state their opinion regarding house music, he/she is likely to say that everything is normal and that this kind of music is “cool”.

It is true that one cannot contradict their opinion and it is even more true to say that we are responsible for the way we raised them and for whatever might have happened during their childhood.

We know that fashion has always had a bit of nonconformism and this observation is valid as far as the entire 20th century is concerned. Let us remember rock’n’roll, the “Beatles” mania, the psychedelic music of the ‘70s.

The house phenomenon has now reached its climax and, as I previously mentioned, house music is present in discos all around the world. No one knows how long this will last. There are signs that this genre might divide for I saw a series of posters in Spain, which sounded as follows: housexmusic or housexmania. What is this supposed to mean? House music with a sexual message? Mania for

house music, sex, or for both of them? Mihai Paulic, a poet from Onești city, who died not long ago, used to say, in his quatrains, “The cudgel, the sex and the stupidity / Are the law in Romania (and not only in Romania).

Below is a list of the most recent offers from house music clubs in Romania and all over the world:

1. Friday 23rd January, starting with 5 am – (After Hours) Club Posh – Bucharest. You go in at 5 am and finish around 1 or 2 pm. There is also a special programme for those who are late for the party.

2. Liberty Parade

It seems there is always money for organising such events. In this respect, an amount of 200,000 euros was spent to renovate a club based in Bucharest. When renovating it, the high demand registered in the “Main party” market segment was mainly considered as the weekends in clubs are more and more animated by foreign DJs that cover the entire spectrum of electronic music. You can start your weekend on a Thursday and finish it on a Monday afternoon, like “a great warrior”. There are after all three working days left and in the end “laziness has never killed anyone”. You can find drugs in almost all house music clubs in the country and around the world, where the providers are protected. Life is indeed wonderful...

Are we being misled by false reference points?

After being swamped with valueless acts of culture, the ordinary man finds it difficult to distinguish between the good and the bad in art, this thick welter dominated by kitsch. These reference points obviously come from somewhere, from a place where profitable, fast and superficial business plans originate.

These false reference points are designed to cater for large masses of people and not with the aim to develop original work, art or a sense of beauty.

The taste for beauty is, as Hegel used to say, “capable of being refined” (Hegel, Georg, Wilhelm, Friederich, 1979) and these producers of kitsch know this fact. At the same time they know that people (not all of them) don’t have the time, the skills or the educational level necessary in order to understand and appreciate valuable art. As far as music is concerned, as this is the art component we herein refer to, one may say that it is easier to convert the larger masses of people using various modern means of communication such as the radio, the television, the internet (www.youtube.com). This website has everything one can imagine: all sorts of music, performed by all sorts of artists from all over the world, information regarding all life domains one might be interested in, as well as regarding the strangest poses of people or animals. There is also another website called www.trilulilu.com, which presents information strictly related to music as well as all kinds of music productions covering the entire musical spectrum. Everyone has access to these websites and the possibility to share their thoughts and opinions. They can make a personal contribution and can chat with other internet surfers. However, the best way to promote such commercial music is by means of radio and television. If we take a look at the TV schedules for ten TV channels, we will

notice that approximately 60-70% of the total amount of broadcast time is covered by entertainment TV programmes.

These TV shows invite artists who belong to the commercial music world and very few artists who promote good quality music. Those who serve real art have no value at all? They do but no one really seems to care... The taste for beauty is built in time and a well-educated, refined taste for beauty doesn't bring much money in the pockets of those who possess it and those who really own it are so few that catering for their needs doesn't seem to be regarded as necessary. It is better then to promote pseudo stars who attract a lot of money and short-term fame. The false reference points promoted on a daily basis are part of the same category of stars (and we mainly refer to TV shows) whose presence and vocabulary irritate millions of people. And if this wasn't enough, apart from these shows where such so-called stars are constantly "yelling" instead of talking, there are other ways to inform oneself (magazines and tabloids), which promote all sorts of irrelevant, "mushy" aspects of their private lives.

You might as well wonder if the individual is indeed forced to watch these shows as long as there is always an alternative to that, such as reading a book, watching a TV show on Discovery or a movie. In the old times there was a joke that is worth mentioning in relation to the current situation: "If I turn on the radio, the TV, or open a magazine or a newspaper, I see the same local stars...I'm afraid to open even a tin of canned food".

Speaking about honesty and value in art, Vlahuță made a wonderful remark in his writings, one hundred years ago when Romanian literature was swamped with a great deal of minstrels that had learned in Paris "how to make a tie knot" and published all kinds of magazines and journals that they used so as to show their lack of talent and education and to defame the geniuses of those times (such as Eminescu, Creangă, Alecsandri).

"This kind of minstrels, smoke without having fire and this is why their songs sound more like a beggar's cry than art. Let us leave them do their job as they see it, ephemeral for us and rewarding for them. What tuneful sounds – I was about to say caterwauling – can Romanian lyres make at solemn ceremonies and how a part of our inspired minstrels' thoughts turn to smoke, with the easiness with which smoke dissipates" (Vlahuță, Alexandru , 1974.).

What reference points do the young people of our times use when there is so much confusion and so many offers in the world art and culture? Where is the original and where is the fake? How do we recognise them?

We know well that creation in art doesn't imitate anything in particular but it brings to life the real values. The greatest works of art shaped the world, endowed it with new elements and new meanings but the genius behind the work of art is still the one who shapes it from an axiological standpoint, he/she reveals, he/she does what only God can do. "Creation is inexplicable", says Berdiaev (Berdiaev, Nikolai, 1980) - "Creation is a mystery. The mystery of creation is the

mystery of freedom. The mystery of freedom is unfathomable and impossible to express. It is the dark”.

The globalisation or the tolerance of misery ignores the creation, the value, the art and the human and we know neither how much damage it can cause nor for how long it is here to stay. We only know we cannot protect ourselves from these “effects”: model, modern, drugs, smog, fashion, fad, effect, cause, development, solution, revolution, evolution, involution, performance, failure, food, excrement, capability, incapability, violence, peace, numbness, enthusiasm, love, hatred, faith, aspiration, bigotry, atheism, fanaticism, terrorism, capitalism, communism, tolerance, instance, façade, street garbage, beginning, ending, life, death, global.

References

1. Bauman, Z. 2004. *Comunitatea* (The Community). Antet, Filipeștii de Pădure, Prahova.
2. Berdiaev, N. 1980. *Filosofia Inegalității* (The Philosophy of Inequality). Lausanne.
3. Drîmbă, O. 1984. *Istoria culturii și civilizației* (The History of Culture and Civilization). Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București.
4. Hegel, G. and Wilhelm, F. 1979. *Despre arta și poezie* (About Art and Poetry). Minerva, București.
5. Vlahuță, A. 1974. *Opere literare* (Literary Works). Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București.