Occidental College Music

Will Black

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An Introduction to Post-Apocalyptic Ambient Music

Post-apocalyptic ambient music is an augury of the death of historical memory. Historical memory allows culture to survive across generations through traditions, objects, and art; however, the conditions of the post-apocalypse will obliterate historical memory, leading to historical dementia. In the generation following the apocalypse, survivors will be left to pick up the pieces of a shattered world in an attempt to reassemble their destroyed cultures. These reconstructed cultures will be a distorted imitation of what once was. With every subsequent generation, this cultural parody will become increasingly warped and distant from its original form, eventually de-territorializing to the point of complete disintegration. Imagine: in a post-apocalyptic world, you find a cassette tape and cassette player amongst the debris. You continually play the cassette, gradually wearing it out with every listen. Eventually the tape is warped beyond recognition and on the verge of breaking, yet you still find immense comfort in its deformed sound. To preserve its content, you record the warped cassette to a new tape, which allows you to continue your obsessive listening. You repeat this process as often as each cassette breaks, leading to further and further deformation. Post-apocalyptic ambient music is the result of this process.

Blue and Green

This song is an aberration from the rest of the music in this presentation and takes the listener on a journey by rapidly introducing new content. The song begins with a trap feel, representing the color blue, and is followed by a downtempo-style section, which represents green. I followed standard hip-hop production guidelines, focusing on powerful percussion and big bass. Though this song is very different from ambient music, you can still hear ambient music's influence on the production's textures and sense of space.

Sea Glass

Although this piece isn't post-apocalyptic, it exemplifies many aspects of traditional ambient music. I tried to create a lush, spacious environment lacking a firm melody or tempo that allows the listener to drift away. The waves of sound and twinkling textures represent waves

lapping on a shore strewn with sea glass. This piece's use of texture and mood to symbolize an environment was inspired by impressionist composers such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. My friend Owen Ardell contributed some of the parts heard in this piece.

Concentric Circles

I based this piece around Brian Eno's method of incommensurate cycles, which allows the composer to easily generate a constantly changing piece of music. Listen to how the different parts line up with each other in new ways as time progresses. While this piece isn't as noisy as post-apocalyptic ambient music, its lo-fi textures, use of cassette tapes, and overall mournful feel are dissimilar from traditional ambient music. Owen Ardell also contributed some parts to this piece.

Pewter Fish in a Pewter Fish Tank

The quiet opening of this piece gradually grows into a thick wall of noise featuring pseudofigurative melodies, or obscured, semi-detectable suggestions of melodies rather than openly presented ones. This forces the listener to focus especially hard to detect the melodies among the noise. Our individual auditory sensitivities will determine what musical content we're each able to decipher. These pseudofigurative melodies represent the blurring, dissolving culture in the post-apocalypse.

Decomposition #7

The title of this piece references Composition #7 by LaMonte Young, which similarly consists of just two notes held for "a very long time." This piece is based around the number seven: I created five drone tracks and had my father contribute two, adding up to seven tracks over seven minutes. Each drone crescendos and decrescendos up to seven times over the course of the piece, which, similar to incommensurable cycles, lines up in unique ways with the other drones throughout the piece and creates a long polyrhythm. As the piece progresses, it gets noisier and noisier, eventually dissolving into static.

A Junkyard Tornado

Much of this piece's content is made up of reorganized samples generated by an AI. The song portrays late-stage historical dementia and uses lots of noise to unsettle the listener. The long droning chords signify the impoverishment of culture in the generations following the apocalypse. Mournful screams are buried beneath the droning chords and white noise, lamenting the loss of our world.