

**Why ASMR Is Listened To and Noise Music
has to Be Explained**

Between Bodily Self-Regulation and Cognitive Engagement

Dr. Michael Bühler

Zurich, December 2025

Introduction	3
1. ASMR and Experimental Noise Music: Formal Similarities, Divergent Reception	5
2. Purpose and Expectation	6
3. Affektive and Physiological Resonance	7
4. Media Mediation and Context	8
5. Cultural Expectations	10
6. Physiological and Psychological Effects	11
7. Closeness and Intimacy	12
8. Expectation and Predictability	13
9. Media Formats and Accessibility	14
10. Cultural Coding.....	16
References.....	19

Summary

This article examines the **divergent reception of ASMR and experimental noise music** by considering **acoustic, affective, medial, and cultural factors**.

While ASMR achieves broad, everyday resonance through repetition, predictability, intimacy, and compatibility with digital platforms, the perception of **experimental musical forms** – particularly those relying on noise-based materials, atonality, formal reduction, or deliberate violations of expectation – remains comparatively marginal, even among **classically socialized listeners**.

Historical composers such as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, and Helmut Lachenmann, alongside contemporary figures including Alvin Lucier, Christina Kubisch, and Marcel Zisler, illustrate the wide spectrum of experimental approaches.

The analysis demonstrates that the **widespread popularity of ASMR** is less attributable to specific sonic properties than to **bodily immediacy, emotional expectation security, and high media accessibility**, whereas experimental noise music, due to its cognitive demands, institutional framing, and cultural coding **as an aesthetic challenge**, remains largely confined to a **specialized audience**. The findings thus highlight that the **popularity and affective impact of sound** are not determined solely by acoustic structure, but depend crucially on media accessibility, cultural coding, aesthetic function, and the respective context of reception.

Introduction

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) has evolved since the early 2010s from a initially marginal internet practice into a global **media-cultural phenomenon**. Through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or specialized streaming services, ASMR content now reaches millions of users and is deliberately employed for **stress reduction, relaxation, sleep support, and emotional regulation**. Empirical studies describe ASMR as a **complex psycho-physiological experience** triggered by specific auditory and visual stimuli – such as soft voices, repetitive sounds, slow movements, or simulations of interpersonal closeness – and associated with **measurable changes in affect, heart rate, and subjective well-being** (Barratt & Davis, 2015; Poerio et al., 2018).

In contrast, the reception of **experimental musical forms**, particularly those that rely heavily on noise-based material, atonality, formal reduction, or the deliberate avoidance of traditional musical expectation structures, remains comparatively marginal – even among **classically socialized listener groups**. Representative examples include historical avant-garde figures such as **John Cage**, whose *4'33"* foregrounds the absence of intended sonic structure; **Karlheinz Stockhausen**, who disrupts conventional expectations through serial and electronic procedures; **György Ligeti**, whose dense clusters and micro-intervals undermine traditional harmonic concepts; and **Helmut Lachenmann**, whose *musique concrète instrumentale* foregrounds noise and unconventional playing techniques. Contemporary composers such as **Alvin Lucier**, known for experiments with space and resonance; **Christina Kubisch**, who translates electromagnetic phenomena into artistic sound contexts; and **Marcel Zisler**, who combines electronic and acoustic noise landscapes to destabilize conventional listening expectations, further extend this experimental spectrum.

These experimental approaches stand in marked contrast to ASMR content, which deliberately emphasizes **bodily immediacy, intimacy, and recognizability**. ASMR generates **immediate affective resonance** through predictability, repetition, and micro-varied patterns, embedded within **low-threshold digital platforms** such as YouTube or TikTok that facilitate easy access and individualized use. Experimental music, by contrast, is frequently bound to **institutional frameworks** (concert halls, academic festivals, curated listening situations), demands **cognitive processing**,

and depends heavily on cultural socialization, prior knowledge, and contextual framing for its aesthetic impact.

The disparity in reception between ASMR and experimental music thus points to fundamental differences in acoustic structure, emotional coding, media mediation, and cultural framing: ASMR combines low-threshold, bodily-affective immediacy with digital accessibility, whereas experimental music requires **distance, reflection, and selective cultural engagement**, thereby limiting its reach and popularity.

From an acoustic and perceptual-psychological perspective, ASMR content relies heavily on established mechanisms of **auditory calming and predictability**. The sonic stimuli are typically quiet, dynamically constrained, spectrally balanced, and temporally repetitive – properties that facilitate **parasympathetic activation** and reduce cognitive load by minimizing expectation violations (Zwicker & Fastl, 1999; Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Experimental music, by contrast, frequently operates through rupture, unpredictability, and heightened cognitive complexity. According to models of **musical expectation** (Huron, 2006), such features may increase attentional engagement but can also provoke **stress, irritation, or rejection**, particularly among listeners without specific aesthetic or analytical preparation.

Psychologically, the **mode of emotional address** is also crucial. ASMR functions primarily **bottom-up**, targeting immediate sensory and affective processes without requiring extensive cultural knowledge. Experimental music, on the other hand, often unfolds its aesthetic logic only through **reflective, contextualized listening**, relying on **top-down processes**, music-theoretical understanding, or institutional legitimation. Research on music reception indicates that **perceived familiarity, expectation conformity, and emotional clarity** are key predictors of positive evaluation (Margulis, 2014; Eerola & Vuoskoski, 2011).

Another central factor is **media mediation**. ASMR is tightly coupled to **digital platform logics**: algorithmic visibility, intimate production aesthetics, direct address of the audience, and explicit usage labels (“for sleep,” “for anxiety,” “for relaxation”) pre-structure reception. In contrast, the institutional context of experimental music often generates **high cultural access thresholds and implicit expectations**. Emotional functionality is frequently left implicit or deliberately downplayed in favor of **aesthetic autonomy**.

Finally, **cultural horizons of expectation** play a decisive role. ASMR is increasingly perceived as a legitimate form of self-care and mental health prevention, whereas experimental music remains historically associated with **avant-garde discourse, distinction, and provocation**. These attributions shape not only willingness to engage, but also **affective openness** toward the respective sound practices.

In summary, the differing resonance of ASMR and experimental music is less attributable to sonic material alone than to a **complex interplay of acoustic design, psychological processing, media framing, and cultural meaning-making**. Analyzing these factors simultaneously opens new perspectives for the contemporary mediation of experimental sound art in digital contexts.

In the following sections, these aspects are examined in a **comparative framework**.

1. ASMR and Experimental Noise Music: Formal Similarities, Divergent Reception

Although **ASMR** and **experimental noise music** may at first glance appear to be fundamentally different sonic phenomena, they in fact share several **formal acoustic characteristics** that music-psychological and acoustic research identifies as highly relevant for auditory perception.

These include in particular:

Noise dominance

Both phenomena frequently employ sound material that lies beyond traditional pitch-based melody and instead emphasizes **noise components, textural sound, and non-tonal sonic events**. In ASMR production, this includes whispering, brushing, or tapping sounds, which – due to their spectral distribution – function perceptually as forms of noise (Poerio et al., 2018). In experimental music, noise likewise often dominates as an aesthetic material, whether in **musique concrète** (Schaeffer, 1966) or in the noise practices of the contemporary avant-garde (Cox, 2011).

Structural reduction

ASMR stimuli tend toward **simplified, predictable structures** with minimal rates of change, whereas experimental noise music often employs **reduced or fragmented**

formal organizations that deliberately undermine traditional musical syntax. From a psychoacoustic perspective, this reduction lowers temporal organizational complexity, yet leads to markedly different psychological effects depending on expectation and contextual framing (Wald-Fuhrmann, 2015).

Micro-variation

Both ASMR and experimental noise music rely on **subtle microstructural variations**, such as fine fluctuations in amplitude, spectrum, or rhythmic articulation, which activate deeper levels of auditory processing (Zwicker & Fastl, 1999). In ASMR, these micro-variations serve to **focus attention and promote relaxation**, whereas in experimental music they often aim at a heightened, conscious awareness of sonic processes.

Despite these formal and acoustic parallels, modes of reception and affective listener responses diverge substantially, reflecting differences in expectation, cultural framing, and perceptual orientation.

2. Purpose and Expectation

A central difference between **ASMR** and **experimental noise music** lies in their **intended purpose** and the **expectation frameworks** with which listeners approach these sound practices. These expectations fundamentally **structure perception** and influence both **affective responses** and **receptive willingness**.

ASMR is explicitly designed as a **functional media format**. Its content is clearly oriented toward **relaxation, stress reduction, sleep aid, or emotion regulation**, and is explicitly labeled, framed, and marketed accordingly (e.g., “for sleep,” “for anxiety”). Users approach ASMR with a **positive, goal-directed expectation**: the sound is intended to **soothe, provide security, and promote physical well-being**. Research in music and perception psychology shows that such **pre-formed** expectations significantly modulate affective evaluation of sound and increase the likelihood of positive emotional responses (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008; Margulis, 2014). ASMR thus primarily addresses the listener as a corporeal-affective subject, rather than as an analytically interpreting agent.

Experimental noise music, by contrast, generally pursues no **immediate utilitarian function**. It has historically and discursively been positioned as an **aesthetic practice of irritation, reflection**, and boundary experience. The expectation is not relaxation, but rather a conscious engagement with sound

material, form, perception, and meaning. This expectation is often associated with **cognitive effort, uncertainty**, or even resistance. Models of musical expectation suggest that repeated **violations of expectation** can increase **attention and cognitive activation**, but without a suitable context may also induce **rejection or overload** (Huron, 2006).

Moreover, experimental music is often received within discursively charged contexts – for example, in **concert halls, academic settings**, or within **art-theoretical narratives**. These contexts implicitly signal that what is heard need not be immediately comprehensible or pleasant, but rather interpreted, explained, or historically contextualized. Consequently, the **emotional effect** is often **mediated, delayed, or intellectualized**, rather than directly **bodily** or **affectively immediate**.

The divergent resonance of ASMR and experimental noise music can therefore be largely attributed to differences in **purpose** and **expectation economy**: While ASMR provides **predictable expectations, functional clarity**, and **affective immediacy**, experimental music deliberately operates with **openness, ambiguity**, and **aesthetic challenge**. These differences shape not only individual listening experiences, but also the reach, acceptance, and cultural positioning of each sound practice.

3. Affective and Physiological Resonance

Empirical research from **psychophysiology** and **media psychology** indicates that **ASMR experiences** can be associated with **clearly positively valenced affective states** as well as measurable **physiological responses**. Studies report, among other effects, reductions in heart rate, increased parasympathetic activation, and subjectively perceived relaxation and emotional safety (Fredborg, Clark & Smith, 2017; Lochte et al., 2018). These effects are partially comparable to those documented in research on meditation, mindfulness-based relaxation techniques, or soothing music. Crucially, ASMR stimuli are typically perceived as non-threatening, controllable, and predictable – properties considered central for **positive affective regulation** in emotion research (Gross, 2015).

By contrast, **experimental music** – especially forms employing **noise-like material, sonic roughness, or formal openness** – is often associated with ambivalent, cognitively demanding, or even contradictory reactions.

Neuroscientific studies on music processing indicate that unfamiliar or difficult-to-predict auditory events strongly activate frontal and prefrontal brain areas, which are linked to **cognitive control, evaluation, and meaning-making** (Brattico, Bogert, & Jacobsen, 2013). This neural activation is less associated with immediate affective clarity and more with **processes of analysis, irritation, or curiosity**, which resist simple categorizations such as “pleasant” or “unpleasant.”

From a music sociological and cultural-psychological perspective, it is further emphasized that emotional responses to experimental music depend heavily on cultural socialization, aesthetic education, and habitual listening practices. Studies show that listeners with high musical expertise or prior experience with contemporary music evaluate **complex or dissonant sound structures** significantly differently from novices – often **less negatively, yet more reflectively or distantly** (Hargreaves, Miell & MacDonald, 2005; Bullot & Reber, 2013). Emotional reactions here are not primarily driven by immediate sensory affect but by **top-down processes** that incorporate cultural knowledge, aesthetic norms, and individual expectations.

Thus, ASMR predominantly promotes a bottom-up-oriented affective response, emerging directly from sensory features and usage contexts, whereas experimental music operates in a mode of aesthetic openness that intentionally avoids or delays affective clarity. The differing **affective profiles** of these phenomena should therefore be understood not as a simple contrast of “positive” versus “negative,” but as expressions of distinct modes of emotional processing: regulatory, soothing, and functional on the one hand; **reflective, cognitively demanding, and culturally mediated** on the other.

4. Media Mediation and Context

ASMR content is typically embedded in highly **intimate and personalized media environments**. Characteristic features include the use of headphones, binaural or close-microphone recording techniques, and direct, often whispered address to the audience. Media studies research indicates that such production and reception conditions can generate a strong sense of **social closeness, presence, and interaction**, even when no real interaction occurs (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). These **parasocial effects** enhance **emotional engagement** and facilitate **affective resonance** (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

From a perceptual-psychological perspective, it is also relevant that headphone settings focus auditory attention and minimize external distractions. Studies on **auditory immersion** demonstrate that spatially proximate, detailed sound sources trigger **more intense emotional processing** than distant or diffusely perceived sounds (Västfjäll, 2003). **ASMR exploits these mechanisms** deliberately, creating the **illusion of physical closeness** and thereby supporting **affective self-regulation**. The media environment functions not merely as a transmission medium but as an integral component of the experience.

By contrast, **experimental noise music** is predominantly experienced in institutionally framed contexts, such as concert halls, galleries, contemporary music festivals, or academic publications. Cultural-sociological research shows that such contexts are associated with **specific norms, expectations, and implicit access requirements** (Bourdieu, 2000). Reception is therefore more cognitively framed: listeners often approach the music with an attitude of analysis, evaluation, or aesthetic distance, rather than with expectations of immediate emotional impact.

Moreover, the **performance context** influences the **perceived social role** of the audience. While **ASMR use** is usually **private, voluntary, and needs-oriented**, attending experimental music events often involves **cultural practices** that demand attention, discipline, and symbolic capital. Studies on concert reception show that formalized performance situations tend to inhibit emotional spontaneity and promote reflective processing (Small, 1998; Clarke, 2005).

These differences in **media and institutional embedding** have a direct effect on **receptive openness**. While **ASMR facilitates affective access** through **low-threshold availability, intimacy, and clear usage contexts**, **experimental noise music** often imposes **higher access barriers** that delay or intellectualize emotional responses. The **divergent resonance** of these phenomena can thus be understood primarily as a consequence of their different media dispositifs, rather than merely as a result of sound properties.

5. Cultural Expectations

ASMR has, in recent years, become an established everyday cultural practice, closely associated with discourses on **self-care, mental well-being, and individual stress management**. From a cultural studies perspective, ASMR can be understood as part of a broader shift toward personalized, media-mediated practices of emotion regulation, which have gained significance particularly in late-modern societies (Illouz, 2007; Rosa, 2016). ASMR is not primarily experienced as an **aesthetic object**, but as a **functional medium** for stabilizing one's own psychological and physiological state.

This **cultural framing** decisively shapes perception: when sound practices are socially recognized as legitimate forms of self-optimization or self-care, the threshold for engagement is substantially lowered. Media usage studies show that culturally positively connoted practices are **received with greater emotional openness and less critical scrutiny**, as they align with social norms of “**taking good care of oneself**” (Couldry, 2013). ASMR is thus embedded in a meaning framework that not only enables positive affective reactions but implicitly expects them.

Experimental music, in contrast, is culturally often perceived as an **aesthetic challenge** or as an **expression of artistic research**. Its reception has historically been closely tied to avant-garde discourses, differentiation from the mainstream, and deliberate provocation. Cultural sociological studies show that such art forms frequently require symbolic capital: knowledge, experience, and cultural socialization function as prerequisites for legitimate participation (Huhn, Bourdieu, & Johnson, 1996). Emotional reactions are less spontaneously articulated and are often reflexively categorized or intellectualized.

Empirical reception research demonstrates that unfamiliar or norm-deviating musical styles initially elicit more frequent rejection or misunderstanding, but can be perceived more differentiatedly with increased exposure and cultural embedding (Szpunar, Schellenberg, & Pliner, 2004). The **emotional accessibility of experimental music** is thus often a learning- and mediation-dependent process, supported by educational contexts, discursive framing, or curatorial mediation. Without these contexts, the affective access for many listeners remains limited.

The **divergent cultural narratives** – ASMR as an everyday well-being practice, experimental music as a demanding aesthetic art form – therefore profoundly

shape the perceptual and evaluative processes of listeners. While ASMR is received in a cultural climate that encourages emotional openness and **immediate impact**, experimental music is often associated with **expectations of distance, analysis, and intellectual engagement**. These narratives not only structure individual listening experiences but also influence institutional mediation, media visibility, and long-term reception patterns.

6. Physiological and Psychological Effects

ASMR generally acts immediately at the level of bodily affect regulation and primarily unfolds its effects through **somatosensory and autonomic processes**. Neurophysiological studies suggest that ASMR stimuli are associated with activations in brain regions relevant for emotional self-regulation, social closeness, and interoceptive awareness, including the **anterior cingulate cortex** and the **insula** (Smith, Fredborg, & Kornelsen, 2020). These activation patterns resemble those observed in research on **soothing tactile stimuli** or **affiliative social interactions**. Accordingly, recipients frequently report ASMR experiences as **physically perceptible, relaxing, and immediately pleasant**, without requiring conscious cognitive interpretation or aesthetic appraisal.

In contrast, **experimental music** often primarily engages **cognitive and aesthetic processing mechanisms**. Studies on musical information processing indicate that unfamiliar, complex, or structurally open sound forms demand increased **attentional resources** and are strongly associated with **analytical processing modes** (Koelsch, 2014). Emotional reactions here arise less from automatic affective resonance and more from deliberate engagement with form, material, and meaning. In aesthetics research, this process has been described as “**distanced emotionality**”, where affective responses are mediated through **reflection**, interpretation, and contextualization (Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004).

Moreover, research on **embodiment theory** shows that **body-proximal stimuli** – such as those dominant in ASMR – are preferentially processed **bottom-up**, whereas **abstract or structurally complex stimuli** require greater **top-down modulation** (Gallese & Sinigaglia, 2011). Experimental music frequently operates deliberately in this **top-down mode**, compelling listeners to question established listening schemas and develop new meaning attributions. Consequently, its emotional impact is less immediate but potentially **more enduring and nuanced**.

These fundamental differences in processing modes explain why ASMR is often described as “**relaxing**” or “**physically pleasant**”, whereas experimental music more frequently evokes descriptors such as “**challenging**”, “**irritating**”, or “**intellectually stimulating**”. Both forms address **different levels of perception** and fulfill distinct functions in emotional and aesthetic experience – a distinction that is central for the mediation, contextualization, and evaluation of these auditory phenomena.

7. Closeness and Intimacy

ASMR achieves its effects largely through **technologically mediated intimacy**, particularly via close-miking, binaural recording techniques, and whispering. These methods simulate an **extreme spatial proximity** between the sound source and the listener, a proximity that in everyday life usually occurs only in **familiar social situations**. Media psychology research indicates that such auditory proximity effects promote parasocial interactions and evoke feelings of security, personal attention, and emotional safety (Forster, 2021). Whispering is not only quieter but also alters the **spectral profile** of the sound, enhancing the perception of vulnerability and trust (Zuckerman, Miyake, & Hodgins, 1991).

From a psychoacoustic perspective, close-miking activates interoceptive and affective processing mechanisms, as spatial proximity is evolutionarily linked to social relevance and the need for protection (Blauert, 1996). The resulting illusion of a “**shared space**” reduces **cognitive distance** and promotes a receptive attitude in which sounds are perceived less as aesthetic objects and more as **interpersonal signals**. ASMR deliberately leverages these mechanisms to create a sense of **controlled intimacy**, which **stabilizes emotions** and minimizes uncertainty.

Experimental music, by contrast, often pursues an aesthetic of distance. Sounds are not presented as personalized signals but as autonomous, often abstract sonic events. In the tradition of musical modernism and postmodernism, distance is intentionally cultivated to enable **reflection, critical perception, and structural attention** (Adorno & Adorno, 1973). Recording techniques and performance contexts frequently avoid extreme proximity and personalized address to emphasize the **autonomy of the artwork** and prevent affective appropriation.

From an **aesthetic-theoretical perspective**, this difference can be explained through the concept of “**aesthetic distance**”, which posits that emotional impact in art arises from a controlled separation between the observer and the object (Bullough, 1912). Experimental music positions listeners not as intimate counterparts but as observing, interpreting subjects. Emotional effects therefore arise **indirectly** – through **irritation, unfamiliarity, or intellectual tension** – rather than through immediate closeness or affective safety.

The contrast between ASMR and experimental music can thus be understood less as a difference in **sound material** and more as a difference in **media-mediated relational design**: ASMR **simulates closeness** and generates **emotional security**, while experimental music employs **distance** to foster **aesthetic autonomy, critical perception, and cognitive openness**. These differing modes of relationship between sound and listener decisively shape the emotional and cultural reception of each practice.

8. Expectation and Predictability

ASMR relies heavily on repetition, predictability, and ritualized expectancy. Typical ASMR formats follow clear, recurring patterns: consistent sound sources, steady tempos, repetitive movements, and familiar triggers such as tapping, brushing, or whispering. Cognitive psychology research indicates that such repetitive structures reduce processing load and place the brain in a state of **enhanced predictive certainty**, which is associated with **relaxation and affective stabilization** (Clark, 2013). Repetition in this context is not monotonous but regulatory: it minimizes surprise and supports a sense of control over perception.

From a **neuroscientific perspective**, this effect can be explained by predictive processing models, according to which positive affect arises when sensory inputs match expectations and prediction errors remain low (Friston, 2010). ASMR strategically exploits these mechanisms by introducing minimal variations within stable patterns: enough novelty to sustain attention, but not enough to provoke irritation or uncertainty. The resulting emotional impact arises from the **balance between recognition and gentle microvariation**.

Experimental music, by contrast, often follows an aesthetic of disruption. It deliberately employs interruptions, structural instability, unexpected sonic events, or the intentional violation of conventional musical expectations. Theoretically and aesthetically, this aligns with concepts of **estrangement and negativity**, which have been understood since the 20th-century musical avant-garde as productive strategies (Nyman & Eno, 1999). **Irritation** here is not a disturbance but a **central aesthetic tool** that commands attention and fosters **reflective distance**.

Empirical studies on musical expectation show that **violations of expected patterns** often elicit increased cognitive activation but are not necessarily associated with positive valence (Koelsch, Vuust, & Friston, 2019). In experimental music, prediction errors are frequently left unresolved, deliberately maintained to provoke ambivalent **affective reactions**, oscillating between **curiosity, overload, fascination, and rejection**. Emotional impact is thus less about **safety** and more about the productive tension between expectation and violation.

The contrast between ASMR and experimental music can therefore be described as differing strategies of expectation management: ASMR stabilizes perception through repetition and predictability, whereas experimental music destabilizes perception to provoke aesthetic reflection and cognitive openness. These opposing principles significantly shape the **affective quality of the listening experience**, explaining why ASMR is often perceived as **soothing**, whereas experimental music is experienced as **challenging or polarizing**.

9. Media Formats and Accessibility

ASMR is highly compatible in its **aesthetic, technical, and social structure** with the **economies of digital platforms**. The content is typically **short-form, serially producible, algorithmically discoverable**, and tailored for individualized consumption scenarios. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify promote ASMR through recommendation systems that encourage **repetitive usage, long dwell times, and intimate reception**. Media studies suggest that formats with clear sensory stimuli, low narrative complexity, and high recognizability circulate particularly effectively in **algorithmically governed environments** (Burgess & Green, 2018). ASMR meets these conditions almost ideally, making it a scalable, globally distributed media format.

Moreover, ASMR production is **technically low-threshold**: individuals can create content with **minimal equipment** that still generates **strong affective impact**. This democratization of audiovisual production aligns with central logics of **digital platform culture**, where authenticity, proximity, and consistency often matter more than **institutional legitimacy** (“Crystal Abidin: *Internet Celebrity – Understanding Fame Online*,” 2018). Reception is **time- and location-independent**, usually occurring in **private settings**, which further integrates ASMR into **everyday routines**.

Experimental music, by contrast, remains largely tied to exclusive performance and distribution formats. It is presented through festivals, specialized concert series, academic contexts, or curated art spaces, often requiring specific acoustic conditions, spatial arrangements, or performative framing. Cultural sociology research indicates that while such **institutional contexts** enable **deep aesthetic reception**, they simultaneously create **access barriers** and **limit reach** (Becker, 2011). The necessary presence of **experts, program notes, or discursive embedding** further complicates translation into **low-threshold digital formats**.

This divergence also has **economic implications**: whereas ASMR is seamlessly integrated into attention and platform economies, experimental music often operates outside market scalability and remains dependent on funding structures or symbolic capital (Hesmondhalgh, 2012). The media logic of digital platforms – emphasizing speed, repetition, and personalization – often stands in tension with the aesthetic logic of experimental music, which relies on **singularity, context-dependence, and deliberate disruption**.

The differing success of ASMR and experimental music in **digital spaces** is thus **less a question of aesthetic quality** than a consequence of their respective **media compatibility**. ASMR is designed from the outset for digital circulation, whereas experimental music continues to be strongly bound to physical, institutional, and discursive performance conditions.

10. Cultural Coding

ASMR primarily serves a **clearly defined, everyday function**: it is intentionally used for **relaxation, emotion regulation**, and the management of stress or sleep difficulties. This functional embedding positions ASMR as a pragmatic tool of self-care, whose aesthetic value is directly tied to its utility. Research on **everyday aesthetics** shows that **cultural practices** addressing concrete needs and easily integrated into daily routines enjoy particularly high acceptance and repeated use (Berrios, 2004). ASMR is thus perceived **less as an art form** and more as an **affective utility**, whose legitimacy derives from its **effectiveness**.

Experimental music, by contrast, is culturally coded primarily as a challenging, autonomous art form. It demands attention, openness, and often prior knowledge, deliberately resisting immediate functionalization. **Aesthetic theories of modernism** emphasize that the **refusal of functional utility** has historically been considered a key marker of **high art** (Adorno, 1970). In this sense, experimental music is not primarily received for its **relaxing or regulatory effects**, but for its capacity to irritate, provoke reflection, and expand aesthetic perception.

This **differential cultural coding** has direct consequences for reception. Music psychology studies show that listeners evaluate musical stimuli differently depending on the ascribed function: when music is framed as **functional** (e.g., for relaxation), tolerance for **simplicity and repetition** increases; when it is presented as **art**, expectations for **complexity, originality, and interpretive depth** rise (North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999). In everyday usage contexts, experimental music often **fails to meet these expectations**, which it deliberately subverts.

At the same time, the cultural designation of music as “**challenging**” is **socially selective**. Cultural sociology research shows that **access to avant-garde art forms** is often tied to **educational and social background** and requires corresponding reception competencies (Bourdieu, 1984). ASMR, by contrast, operates beyond such distinctions: its effects are immediately perceptible and not dependent on cultural capital.

The divergent resonance of ASMR and experimental music is therefore **less attributable to their sonic properties** than to their **different cultural functionalizations**. ASMR is legitimized as an everyday regulator of emotional

states, whereas experimental music remains positioned as an aesthetic challenge – with all the attendant consequences for **accessibility, acceptance, and reach**.

Conclusion

The comparative examination of **ASMR** and **experimental noise music** shows that their markedly divergent **resonance** results less from the **sonic materials themselves** than from their respective **reception conditions, cultural codings,** and media embedding. Although both practices share formal features such as noise dominance, structural reduction, and microvariation, they unfold fundamentally different effect profiles, operating across physical, cognitive, and social dimensions.

The **popularity of ASMR** can be largely explained by its **bodily immediacy**. ASMR addresses the listener not primarily as an **interpreting subject**, but as a **corporeal-affective being**. The targeted stimulation of **auditory and multisensory processes**, combined with **predictability and repetition**, enables **immediate relaxation and well-being effects**. These effects are further enhanced by **intimate media settings** – such as **close-miking, headphone use, and direct address** – and are seamlessly integrated into everyday routines. ASMR is thus not only an aesthetic, but primarily a functional media format, whose success is closely tied to digital platform logics, algorithmic visibility, and individual accessibility.

Experimental noise music, by contrast, operates under different **cultural premises**. It has historically and discursively been positioned as a **challenging art form**, cultivating **distance, irritation, and reflection**. Its reception often requires **aesthetic competence, contextual knowledge, and cognitive openness**. Rather than providing immediate affective regulation, it aims at **conscious engagement with sound material, form, and perception**. This cognitive orientation, combined with institutional performance frameworks and limited media accessibility, raises the threshold of access and restricts its reach beyond specialized audiences.

It is crucial to understand these differences not as qualitative value judgments, but as expressions of distinct cultural functions. ASMR fulfills an everyday-practical role within contemporary cultures of **self-optimization and emotion regulation**, whereas experimental music asserts its relevance as a space of aesthetic experience, deliberately resisting immediate functionality. The lower popularity of experimental noise music is therefore less a sign of aesthetic failure than a

consequence of its **conscious distancing** from **bodily immediacy, intimacy, and mass-media accessibility**.

From a **cultural and music mediation perspective**, a central insight emerges: the resonance of contemporary sound practices depends not solely on **material properties**, but crucially on framing, expectation management, and media translation. While ASMR consistently integrates these dimensions, experimental music often **deliberately abstains** from doing so. The challenge for future **mediation strategies** lies therefore less in **aesthetic convergence**, and more in the development of formats that render experimental sound art more accessible, without compromising its artistic integrity.

References

- Adorno, G., & Adorno, T. W. (Eds.) (1973). Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft: Vol. 2. Ästhetische Theorie (1. Aufl.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Ahuvia, A. C., & Illouz, E. (1998). Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60(2), 542. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353872>
- Barratt, E. L., & Davis, N. J. (2022). Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A flow-like mental state. *PeerJ*, 3, e851. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851>
- Becker, H. S. (2011). *Art worlds* (25th anniversary ed., updated and expanded, [Nachdr.]). Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press.
- Berrios, R. (2004). Review: Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art. *Music and Letters*, 85(4), 677–679. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/85.4.677>
- Blauert, J. (1996). *Spatial Hearing*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6391.001.0001>
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (Reprint 1984). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Brattico, E., Bogert, B., & Jacobsen, T. (2013). Toward a neural chronometry for the aesthetic experience of music. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 206. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00206>
- Bullot, N. J., & Reber, R. (2013). The artful mind meets art history: Toward a psycho-historical framework for the science of art appreciation. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36(2), 123–137. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12000489>
- Bullough, E. (1912). 'PSYCHICAL DISTANCE' AS A FACTOR IN ART AND AN AESTHETIC PRINCIPLE. *British Journal of Psychology*, 1904-1920, 5(2), 87–118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1912.tb00057.x>
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *Youtube: Online video and participatory culture* (Second edition). Digital media and society series. Cambridge, UK, Medford, MA: polity.

- Clark, A. (2013). Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36(3), 181–204.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12000477>
- Clarke, E. F. (2005). *Ways of Listening*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195151947.001.0001>
- Couldry, N. (2013). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice* (1. Aufl.). Cambridge: polity. Retrieved from
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=1372248>
- Cox, C. (2011). Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 10(2), 145–161.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412911402880>
- Crystal Abidin Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online (2018). *European Journal of Communication*, 33(6), 696–697.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118814646a>
- Forster, R. T. (2021). *Parasocial Romantic Relationships*. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781978722521>
- Fredborg, B., Clark, J., & Smith, S. D. (2017). An Examination of Personality Traits Associated with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 247. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00247>
- Friston, K. (2010). The free-energy principle: A unified brain theory? *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience*, 11(2), 127–138. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2787>
- Gallese, V., & Sinigaglia, C. (2011). What is so special about embodied simulation? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 15(11), 512–519.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2011.09.003>
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781>
- Hargreaves, D. J., MacDonald, R., & Miell, D. (2005). How do people communicate using music? In D. Miell, R. MacDonald, & D. J. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical communication* (pp. 1–26). Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198529361.003.0001>
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2012). *The cultural industries* (3rd ed.). London: SAGE.

- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction; observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Huhn, T., Bourdieu, P., & Johnson, R. (1996). The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54(1), 88.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/431688>
- Koelsch, S. (2014). Brain correlates of music-evoked emotions. *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience*, 15(3), 170–180. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3666>
- Koelsch, S., Vuust, P., & Friston, K. (2019). Predictive Processes and the Peculiar Case of Music. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 23(1), 63–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.10.006>
- Leder, H., Belke, B., Oeberst, A., & Augustin, D. (2004). A model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments. *British Journal of Psychology*, 95(Pt 4), 489–508. <https://doi.org/10.1348/0007126042369811>
- Lochte, B. C., Guillory, S. A., Richard, C. A. H., & Kelley, W. M. (2018). An fMRI investigation of the neural correlates underlying the autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR). *BiolImpacts : BI*, 8(4), 295–304.
<https://doi.org/10.15171/bi.2018.32>
- North, A. C., Hargreaves, D. J., & McKendrick, J. (1999). The influence of in-store music on wine selections. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(2), 271–276.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.84.2.271>
- Nyman, M., & Eno, B. (1999). *Experimental music (second edition)*. Music in the 20th century. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Poerio, G. L., Blakey, E., Hostler, T. J., & Veltri, T. (2018). More than a feeling: Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is characterized by reliable changes in affect and physiology. *PloS One*, 13(6), e0196645.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196645>
- Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A sociology of the relationship to the world* (J. C. Wagner, Trans.). Cambridge, UK, Medford, MA, USA: polity.
- Schaeffer, P. (2002). *Traité des objets musicaux: Essai interdisciplines* (Nouv. éd). Pierres vives. Paris: Seuil.

Small, C. (1999). Musicking – the meanings of performing and listening. A lecture. *Music Education Research*, 1(1), 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461380990010102>

Smith, S. D., Fredborg, B. K., & Kornelsen, J. (2020). Functional connectivity associated with five different categories of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) triggers. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 85, 103021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2020.103021>

Szpunar, K. K., Schellenberg, E. G., & Pliner, P. (2004). Liking and memory for musical stimuli as a function of exposure. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 30(2), 370–381. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.30.2.370>

Tukachinsky, R., & Dorros, S. M. (2018). Parasocial romantic relationships, romantic beliefs, and relationship outcomes in USA adolescents: rehearsing love or setting oneself up to fail? *Journal of Children and Media*, 12(3), 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2018.1463917>

Västhjäll, D. (2003). The subjective sense of presence, emotion recognition, and experienced emotions in auditory virtual environments. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior : The Impact of the Internet, Multimedia and Virtual Reality on Behavior and Society*, 6(2), 181–188. <https://doi.org/10.1089/109493103321640374>

Wald-Fuhrmann, M. (2015). Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, New York: Oxford University Press 2014. *Zeitschrift Der Gesellschaft Für Musiktheorie [Journal of the German-Speaking Society of Music Theory]*, 12(2), 271–274. <https://doi.org/10.31751/815>

Zuckerman, M., Miyake, K., & Hodgins, H. S. (1991). Cross-channel effects of vocal and physical attractiveness and their implications for interpersonal perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 545–554. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.60.4.545>

Zwicker, E., & Fastl, H. (1999). *Psychoacoustics: Facts and models* (2., updated ed.). Springer series in information sciences: Vol. 22. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-09562-1>

Einführung

The comparative examination of **Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response** (ASMR) and experimental noise music – such as that associated with historical avant-garde figures like **John Cage**, **Karlheinz Stockhausen**, or **György Ligeti**, as well as contemporary composers such as **Alvin Lucier** or **Christina Kubisch** – demonstrates that their markedly divergent resonance **arises less from the sonic materials themselves** than from their respective **conditions of reception**, cultural codings, and modes of media embedding.

Although both practices share formal characteristics such as the dominance of noise, structural reduction, and micro-variation, they generate fundamentally different **profiles of effect**, which diverge along bodily, cognitive, and social dimensions.

The popularity of ASMR can largely be explained by its **bodily immediacy**. ASMR does not primarily address the listener as an interpreting subject, but rather as an embodied and affective being. The targeted **stimulation** of auditory and multisensory processes, combined with **expectation security**, **repetition**, and **micro-varied predictability**, enables immediate effects of relaxation and well-being. These effects are further intensified by intimate media settings – such as close-miking, headphone listening, and direct address – and are integrated into everyday routines. ASMR is therefore not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but above all a **functional media format**, whose success is closely linked to digital platform logics, algorithmic visibility, and individual availability. **Low-threshold accessibility**, clearly defined use contexts, and bodily-affective immediacy facilitate emotional responses and promote broad acceptance.

Experimental noise music, by contrast, operates under different cultural premises. Historically and discursively, it is positioned as a **challenging art form** that cultivates **distance**, **irritation**, and **reflection**. Its reception often presupposes aesthetic competencies, contextual knowledge, and cognitive openness. Rather than offering immediate affective regulation, it aims at a conscious engagement with sonic material, form, and perception. This cognitive orientation, combined with **institutional performance** contexts and limited media accessibility, raises the

threshold of access and restricts its reach beyond specialized audiences. Emotional responses are frequently delayed, intellectualized, or mediated through discourse.

Crucially, these differences should **not be understood as qualitative value judgments**, but as expressions of distinct cultural functions. ASMR fulfills a practical everyday role within a contemporary culture of **self-optimization, self-care**, and **emotional regulation**, and is increasingly perceived as a legitimate means of mental health prevention. Experimental music, by contrast, asserts its relevance as a site of aesthetic experience that deliberately resists immediate functionality and instead pursues aesthetic autonomy, critical perception, and cognitive openness. The lower popularity of experimental noise music is therefore less a sign of aesthetic failure than a consequence of its **conscious distancing from bodily immediacy**, intimacy, and mass-media compatibility.

These differences are also reflected in the cultural narratives surrounding both phenomena. While ASMR is received within a cultural climate that favors emotional openness, immediacy of effect, and subjective well-being, experimental music is often burdened with expectations of analysis, distance, and intellectual engagement. These narratives not only shape individual listening experiences, but also influence institutional modes of mediation, media visibility, and long-term patterns of reception. Accordingly, ASMR is frequently described as “relaxing” or “physically pleasant,” whereas experimental music evokes terms such as “challenging,” “irritating,” or “intellectually stimulating.”

The contrast between ASMR and experimental music can thus be described less as a **difference in sonic material** than as a divergence in modes of **mediated relationality** and **economies of expectation**. While ASMR simulates proximity, stabilizes perception, and generates emotional safety, experimental music relies on distance, irritation, and the disruption of expectation in order to provoke aesthetic reflection. Both strategies address different levels of perception and fulfill distinct functions within emotional and aesthetic experience – a distinction that is central to the mediation, contextualization, and evaluation of contemporary sonic practices.

(Schaeffer, 2002) (Cox, 2011)

(Barratt & Davis, 2022) (Poerio, Blakey, Hostler, & Veltri, 2018)

. (Fredborg, Clark, & Smith, 2017) d (Lochte, Guillory, Richard, & Kelley, 2018).
(Barratt & Davis, 2022) (Poerio et al., 2018)

(Hargreaves, MacDonald, & Miell, 2005) (Bulot & Reber, 2013)(Ahuvia & Illouz,
1998) (Rosa, 2019)