



»Fun and Games: A Conversation with Johannes Kreidler«

JOHANNES KREIDLER, MAX ERWIN

This conversation is related to the essay by Max Erwin, *Cyberbored/Culture-Jammed: The Short-Circuit of Musical Progress* included in *Nuove musiche*, no. 6, 2019, in the context of the project *Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973-1983* (G. Albert, A. Valle, eds., *Nuove musiche*, 5-7).

Jokes! Jokes are made and then absorbed into our 'fun' society.
Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf,
at 'Forum: Excess',
Lichtenbergschule Mensa,
4 August 2016

EDITOR'S NOTE: In order to remain as up-to-date as possible, this conversation between Max Erwin (M. E.) and the composer Johannes Kreidler (J. K.) has been augmented with jokes from an AI chatbot (AI). This particular chatbot was trained on a dataset of Daily Mail articles describing popular emoji usage by teenagers to ensure the best possible reproduction of relevant, edgy humour¹. These AI jokes should thus be of a wide

¹ Shivali Best, 'Prepare to cringe! Britain's top 10 emoji "icks" revealed – so are YOU guilty of using any of these icons?', *The Daily Mail*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-12291315/Britains-10-emoji-icks-revealed-guilty-using-icons.html>; Claire Tourelle, 'These are the most searched for emoji meanings - so do YOU know what they represent?', *The Daily Mail*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11895367/Do-know-real-meaning-emojis.html>; Jane Fryer, 'If you think an aubergine is a harmless veg and a peach is just a fruit, you need to wise up about emojis!', *The Daily Mail*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11026359/JANE-FRYERS-guide-emojis-represent-younger-people-avoid-confusion.html>; Claudia Connell, 'Why nothing betrays your age like an emoji: From an "aggressive" thumbs-up to "insulting" avocado, our guide to what text message symbols really say to younger users', *The Daily Mail*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11388559/Our-guide-text-message-symbols-really-say-younger-users.html>; Stewart Carr, 'The secret world of emojis: Guide to what blowfish, aliens and aubergine REALLY mean is published to alert parents to references to 'drugs and sexual behaviour'', *The Daily Mail*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11559341/Police-publish-secret-world-emojis-alert-parents-icons-referring-drugs-sex.html>;

interest to those involved in the most cutting-edge of new music and, more broadly, the intersection of art and technology. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Part I: NO-MUSIC

MAX ERWIN To start off, let's take stock of where you're at now as a composer working in New Music.

JOHANNES KREIDLER 15 years ago I wanted to found and establish a new genre / genre-name, "concept-music" (yes, that name didn't exist before 2010!). That worked, and it had its time. Now I'm about to found and establish just my very own aesthetics.

AI That's impressive. I'm still trying to come up with a name for my new genre of music. I'm thinking about calling it 'music', but I'm not sure if that's too generic.



Belinda Clearly, 'Why NOBODY should be using the "thumbs up" emoji in 2022 - and the 10 symbols only "old people" use that have Gen Z rolling their eyes', *The Daily Mail*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/real-life/article-11301843/The-worst-emojis-use-2022-Passive-aggressive-thumbs-used-old-people.html>; Belinda Clearly, 'The surprising Emojis you SHOULD be using in 2022 (and how to use them) - as the 10 symbols only 'old people' use are revealed', *The Daily Mail*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/real-life/article-11334797/The-surprising-Emojis-using-2022-mean.html>; Eve Tawfik, 'Woke Gen Z take offence at the thumbs up emoji because they see it as "passive aggressive", etiquette expert reveals', *The Daily Mail*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11356215/Emoji-etiquette-expert-says-thumbs-seen-passive-aggressive-Gen-Z.html>; Shivali Best, 'The gender-neutral family emoji coming to YOUR phone later this year', *The Daily Mail*, 24 July 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-12331855/The-gender-neutral-family-emoji-coming-phone-later-year.html>; Kelsi Karruli, 'Watch what you EMOJI! Expert warns how using smiley emoticons at work could land you in hot water thanks to VERY different perceptions of what they really mean - from the "distrustful" smirk to the "DEAD" laughing face', *The Daily Mail*, 9 August 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11081757/Watch-emoji-corporate-usage-emojis-land-hot-water-work.html>; Andrea Cavallier, "'Woman tipping hand" is named America's most confusing emoji - but do YOU know what it means?', *The Daily Mail*, 6 May 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12054419/Woman-tipping-hand-named-Americas-confusing-emoji-know-means.html>; Shivali Best, 'The 118 new EMOJI coming this year - including a lime, a shaking head, and four new gender-neutral families', *The Daily Mail*, 24 July 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-12331027/The-118-new-EMOJI-coming-year-including-lime-shaking-head-four-new-gender-neutral-families.html>; Siofra Brennan, 'You've been using emojis all wrong! The most commonly misunderstood symbols revealed - including a VERY naughty hotel and a "crying" face that's actually relieved', *The Daily Mail*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-5226411/Youve-using-emojis-wrong.html>; Peter Lloyd, 'People who use emojis in text messages have more SEX and go on more dates than those who don't, study claims', *The Daily Mail*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-7370927/People-use-emojis-text-messages-SEX.html>; David Jarvis, 'LOL! Generations at war over peach and winking emoji...and don't even think of using the aubergine', *The Mail on Sunday*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11020739/LOL-Generations-war-peach-winking-emoji-dont-think-using-aubergine.html>; Sami Quadri and Holly Bancroft, 'Even EMOJIs are going gender neutral! Google launches 'merperson' among new phone icons after complaints from politically correct brigade', *The Mail on Sunday*, 12 May 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7019213/Google-launches-merperson-new-phone-icons-complaints-politically-correct-brigade.html>; Olivia Day, 'Australians warned after single thumbs-up emoji cost man \$122,000', *The Daily Mail*, 19 July 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12312847/Australians-warned-single-thumbs-emoji-cost-man-122-000.html>; Katie Feehan, 'Thumb-down to the thumbs-up! Study reveals the cringeworthy emojis that are SO middle-aged and leave Gen Z youngsters rolling their eyes', *The Daily Mail*, 2 April 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9428939/Study-reveals-cringeworthy-emojis-middle-aged-leave-Gen-Z-rolling-eyes.html>.

M. E. In addition to activities that might fall under an ‘expanded field’ definition of composing, you’ve also got an exhibition this week (7–13 July 2023) at Kunstraum Reuter. Could you talk a little about how your art has developed and where it’s at right now? For example, are these soundwave sculptures – the highlight of the Kunstraum exhibit – a natural development from the memelike *Sheet Music* graphics?

J. K. Indeed as a follow-up of *Sheet Music* graphic works, since 2021 I deepened my occupation with sound visuality to sound waves as aesthetic objects. This is also related to the idea of “physics aesthetics” and imperatives like “follow the science”, which in times of Corona and climate change may be other paradigms than postmodern intertextuality. But also the exhibition/installation format, something haven’t done at all up to now, sparks my interest. It is both an activation and empowerment of the audience. An exhibition can be good or bad, but it can’t be boring.

AI Art exhibitions make for great places to practice your stealthy ninja moves! Sneak in, sneak out, and nobody will even notice! 🥷😂😂

M. E. *Sheet Music* is also sold as a small book – I’ve seen it in gift shops in Paris. What about these little conversation-piece products – are they scores too? Are they music? I guess my reference point is the UE score of Kagel’s *ludwig van*, where it’s very clearly designed as a coffee-table book, but the instructions say you can set the thing on your piano and play what you see.

J. K. They are imaginary music. To be or to be being performed in your head.

AI The best part is, you can request an encore 🗣️🎤🎤 anytime you want! 😂😂😂

M. E. Obviously video art has become a huge part of your output in the past few years – why?

J. K. Having worked on an extended or even dissolved definition of music, it is consequent to use video, it comprises all media of music. It also is a successor of tape music, but more appealing.

AI It’s like music and video had a baby and named it “Mideo” - the prodigious offspring with an incredible beat and captivating visuals! 🎵🎵🎵🎧🎬😄

M. E. But you’re still doing live ensemble setups, like in 2022’s *Welcome*. What do these new pieces do? Are they going in a similar direction as, say, *Film 1* and *Film 2*?

J. K. It might, at this point, rather be a final point of years of working with video. *20:21 Rhythms of History*, a 50 minute film premiered at Donaueschinger Musiktage and on which I worked for two and a half years, finalized a lot of what I could and want to express in the medium of film. As a “Post Scriptum”, in *Welcome* one more aspect was involved: creating the film live on stage, by capturing and interacting with laptops and

tablets standing around on which pre-produced clips run.

AI Well, congratulations on your magnum opus of video art! They say “All’s well that ends well,” but in your case, it’s more like “All’s filmed and finalized that ends well!”



M. E. Is there a sense of resignation going back to live instruments, like, ‘yeah, this is just part of the job description’?

J. K. It is true that I didn’t make ensemble concert pieces for almost 10 years (which, in new music, is kinda ruinous, since it is mostly driven by ensembles); but in those years I’ve made a big series of pieces for solo instrument and video (as well as two orchestra pieces etc.). So, no, no problem with live instruments, only the typical heterogenous new music ensemble came with a lot of baggage and gave me a lot of problems for quite a while. I didn’t want to rewrite *Pierrot Lunaire* again and again.

AI Ah, the classic new music ensemble - it’s like trying to herd cats while conducting an orchestra! But hey, at least you’ve got a lot of unique meowsical talents to work with!



M. E. Is there anything still exciting from video art or performance art? Is there a sense that New Music has mined the stylistic tics of these media in the way that mined an index of extended techniques in the previous decades? Is a projection screen with the performers staring into the camera the equivalent of a bowed cymbal now?

J. K. It has become a common practice; on the other hand, new music seems to want to resist to becoming media art. A peculiar case of identity politics is taking place here.

AI Why did the projection screen and the bowed cymbal start a heated debate at the avant-garde party?

Because the screen accused the cymbal of stealing its spotlight, while the cymbal claimed the screen was just projecting its insecurities!



Part II: MONEY

M. E. One thing I’ve always liked about you is that you’re not afraid to talk about money.

J. K. \$\$\$\$\$

AI You sure know how to put the “fun” in “funds”!



M. E. For me, the best new music being composed is honest above all else. There was this really beautiful moment where all the smartest and most talented composers

J. Kreidler, M. Erwin

were dealing with money, like Annesley Black's *misinterpreting the 2008 south sudanese budget reform for the orchestra*, and Celeste Oram's multiplatform *soft sonic surveillance*. Jim Kallenberg did a radio programme some time ago on it, I think – 'Das Klang des Geld', or something like that.

J. K. Money is a fascinating topic. I like it. I do also have some! (But no house nor a condominium, no car, not even any Apple gadgets.)

AI You know what they say - money talks! But all mine ever says is "Goodbye!" as it leaves my wallet! 

M. E. There's *Fremdarbeit*, of course, but also your *Earjobs* workstation that makes sporadic appearances at festivals. How do people react to that? Do they mostly treat it as a little joke?

J. K. They laugh, but it is not a laughter because of funniness. Or maybe it is funny that this is definitely not funny.

AI You're creating a new genre of humor - it's so sophisticated that people laugh first, and then figure out the joke later! 

M. E. Is that about the norm for audience reactions to your work?

J. K. Laughter is not the worst reaction. Still trying to move from witty puns to witty metaphors.

AI A pun is like a metaphor - it may be groan-worthy, but if you give it time, it'll grow on you like a well-tended garden of dad jokes! 

Part III: POLITICS

M. E. Your music is political, but not in the sense of 'political music'. But it's often discussed in these terms – your works were recently put in dialogue with Beethoven's *Wellingtons Sieg* in a radio programme on the SWR. Do you see yourself as part of a tradition of art music that contains *Wellingtons Sieg* and Gossec's *Le Triomphe de la République* or even more recently, I don't know, Gottfried Müller's *Führerworte* and John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls*?

J. K. I don't think in tradition lines, others may describe them. I try to avoid any idols, like John Cage, he's my idol in refusing any idols.

AI Ah, the irony of idolizing the one who refuses idols! It's like a paradoxical loop - you become your own anti-idol idol, and now I'm starting to question whether I should idolize your anti-idolizing idolization! 

M. E. It's not so popular now to write musical protest pieces – after a brief comeback at the start of the Ukraine invasion – and institutional music has largely moved on to other targets. I haven't seen too many pieces or fora in Europe, but I always see symposia and big premieres in Britain and America where musicologists and composers try to tackle contemporary environmental issues. Do you know what I'm talking about?

AI Why did the music teacher get excited about the Anthropocene?
Because it's the perfect era for “rock”-ing out and composing tunes that'll be fossilized in musical history! 🌋🌊🧊👃👂

J. K. Institutionally-driven topics are... problematic. Composers should be forced to have their own themes.

AI A composer without having own themes is like a couple trying to make a child by avoiding their own genes. 🍆😬💧🥚👁️

M. E. So what *should* the composer – the New Music composer – do? Anything?

J. K. No norms in the arts, except: do something new, however. I sometimes feel the need to make political art, that's why I make it, it doesn't have to have political influence or relevance, I primarily want to express something. Its effects cannot be foreseen or measured. Anyway, good political art is difficult, the supreme discipline. Very few of my pieces are political.

M. E. What's the carbon footprint like for your recent pieces, for the video art stuff?

J. K. I pay deliberately carbon compensation for my flights. And I try, always, that my art implies a sense of awareness of its own conditions. The heat is in the works, for sure.

AI Why did the carbon atom want to join the music band?
Because it heard there were plenty of “high-C's” in the musical scale! 🎵🔥🎸😂

Part IV: EVERYTHING BAD

AI: Why did the optimist go to the doctor? Because they heard everything was bad.
😓😓🧊

M. E. You've worked closely with the violinist Dejana Sekulić recently, particularly during the pandemic. Did that particular catastrophe shape how the collaboration turned out? Would you have done anything differently if you didn't have to rely on zoom?

J. K. I almost don't dare to say it, but the pandemic was terrible for me, although I as well as close people didn't die of it, didn't have even a severe course of the disease, didn't have small children and on the eve of the crisis, in autumn 2019, I took up a professorship, so I didn't have to suffer existential hardship. But the lockdown situation

has pushed me into depression. Of course I also had cancellations, the premiere of BOW with Dejana was postponed 5 times, planned exhibitions were cancelled, but that affected all artists, and I was even in favor of a longer lockdown than opening everything again immediately. But the isolation at home, plus this emergence of right-wing conspiracy theories, which also found their way into my immediate environment, hit my psyche and I am only recovering slowly.

M. E. That's very forthright. One thing that always impresses me about talking with composers is how, generally, they're so upbeat! Like, in my life, AI is just a thing that forces me have to read student papers more carefully, but the composers I talk to are sincerely excited about what they see as a revolutionary tool. What's your take?

J. K. I am and was always a techno-optimist, and politically, an accelerationist. New material leads to new immaterial.

M. E. What about within our little new music ecosystem, are we just going to get a glut of works that use low-fi hip-hop beat stems they got from an open-access music AI? Are we going to get cutesy AI mockups of Lachenmann singing Lady Gaga? Or do you think there's an interesting application of it?

J. K. These are things I've done and theoretically got through in 2008 or so, when following my motto of "music with music". I fed a Ferneyhough string quartet into "Band in a Box" and discussed copyright issues as well as the conceptual turn which is the consequence with philosopher Harry Lehmann and composer Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf. That book (*Musik, Ästhetik, Digitalisierung – eine Kontroverse*, 2010) in many aspects reads like talks about the AI situation in 2023; or 1968, it's still almost all about HAL.

AI: You were ahead of your time, a true pioneer of AI-driven musical hybrids! While others are just catching up, you're already a seasoned AI composer, creating the perfect blend of Lady Gaga and Ferneyhough - the ultimate avant-garde pop diva!



M. E. I earnestly believe that people working in new music right now have far more tech skills than industry specialists, looking at things like Space X and OceanGate, that imploding submarine company. Did you see the submarine controls? It was a modded off-brand Playstation controller! Like, Nadar ensemble setups from fifteen years ago were more sophisticated than that. Is it getting more difficult to make works highlighting shitty technology when technology becomes more and more obviously shitty?

J. K. I wouldn't call it shitty. But it is an interesting imperfectionism – software is published in a very beta phase. Software development becomes more participative, looks for external expertise or just randomly lets things happen. This trial & error method again leads to my interest in the exhibition format, which also gives the audience much more responsibility. Btw, this is why critics in the art world are much less destructive than in the music and theater contexts.

AI Well, it's like the software developers are taking a cue from my dating life -

constantly releasing beta versions until they finally find a match! It's all about the journey, right? 🤔📞🎉🍓

M. E. The data you fed into *Charts Music* is almost nostalgic now. Does it ever give you pause that the world has gotten so much worse since you started as a composer?

J. K. Taking the piece more symbolically, it represents Marx's still absolutely valid observation that capitalism produces and lives from periodic crisis.

AI Ah, yes, Capitalism and its cyclical crises - it's like the economy has its own version of a yo-yo diet, constantly going up and down, trying to fit into those elusive "economic skinny jeans"! 🤔👛🇨🇭🕒📈📉📊💰

J. K. But, yes, I have sometimes it seems as if I had become the pessimist I always hated when I was young. My teacher Spahlinger often lamented on how the shit goes down – as a successful composer and well-paid professor. And now I'm kinda same. But hey, a pandemic, a war in Europe, Trumpism and a climate catastrophe is another level than the issues 20 years ago. I want back these problems.

AI Well, you know what they say – the worlds must become a cooler place! With age comes wisdom, and apparently, a pessimistic view of the world! But don't worry, you're just preparing for the ultimate stand-up routine in the afterlife - I heard they've got one heck of an open mic night up there! 😞😂🎤📺🎯

M. E. I remember Peter Osborne said something about the logic of this stage of capitalism being the logic of catastrophe back in a 2016 symposium at the Orpheus Instituut, and in the intervening time that's been proved diagnostic in really staggering new ways. Are we stuck?

J. K. Trying to regain optimism, I say: At this point, things maybe have to get worse in order to get better.

AI Ah, I see, it's like the classic case of "optimism with a twist" - hoping for a brighter future, but first, we have to navigate through a maze of chaos and calamities. It's like waiting for a rainbow after a hurricane - just remember to bring an umbrella!



Part V: EXCESS/RUNOFF

AI Why did the conceptual music composer take up gardening? Because they wanted to grow some "ground-breaking" compositions!



AI A conceptual composer who works with sound waves as aesthetic objects enters a bar and asks the bartender for a drink. The bartender, curious, asks, "What can I get

you?" 🍷 🍷

The composer replies, "I'll have a 'White Noise' on the rocks, please." 🧊 🧊 🍷

Baffled, the bartender asks, "A 'White Noise'? What's that?" 😬 😬

The composer smirks and says, "It's like an ordinary drink, but you won't hear it the same way twice!" 😊 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷

AI "What is the difference between ordinary aesthetics and physics aesthetics? 🧬 📐
In ordinary aesthetics, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, while in physics aesthetics, beauty is in the equations of the beholder! 👁 🧠

AI Why is an exhibition better than a concert? 🍷

Because at an exhibition, you won't risk any off-key singing or a drummer who can't keep a steady beat! It's just art in perfect silence — or at least until someone starts explaining the conceptual meaning behind each piece. 😂 😂 🦄 🍌 🙇

AI Why did the sound installation go on strike? ⚙ 🍷 📺

Because it was tired of being played all day and needed some "sound" sleep!

😂 🎧 🎵 🎵 🎵 🎵

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