

The Musical Drone: A Crash Course

Single or Many Notes

Despite not being a melody, harmony or counter-melody, a drone may have many notes.

What is a musical drone? Essentially, it is a singular pitch-class sustained for the entire duration or most of a musical composition. However, a musical drone is not limited to this definition and is often executed as a succession of pitch-classes that repeat through an entire or most of a musical composition.

Thinking of a drone, Hindustani Classical and Irish Set music instantly come to mind. Many. Non-audiophiles, will associate the drone with early music such as Gregorian chants, the ever present D of bagpipes and Indian music. Yet, drones have found a comfortable home in most styles of music and can be heard in compositions by varying artists such as Bob Dylan (Positively 4th Street) and William Varese's Ionospheres. As for popular music, Dylan uses a 4 note drone on Positively 4th Street, but a single note drone can be heard in The Velvet Undergrounds Venus in Furs.

A Drone is Not

Pachelbel's Canon in D Minor doesn't contain a drone, but it sounds like it does. It's a contrabasso. The cello and the harpsichord are weaving the low end together.

To define the role of a drone in music it is important to establish the ways in which a drone is not utilized. A drone is not a musical theme - a musical theme is the smallest recognizable melodic force of a musical composition such as that heard during the first two bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Neither is it a chord (a musical contrivance that most often layers the first, third and fifth interval of a given scale to create one texture). And, a drone is not present in all forms of early music.

The Drone as Foundation

As a composer, you must to decide to build your musical house upon chords, a drone or melody alone..

Music that utilizes a drone builds upon the drone as a foundation. A drone may be the tonic (first interval) , perfect (fifth interval) or any other pitch-class, although it is most often employed on the tonic or fifth interval.

A drone's pitch-class tends to create a musical paradox, the pitch-class is simultaneously hidden within the layers of music and emphasized: executed notes of the same pitch-class are drowned-out while the drone 's pitch-class is overwhelmingly showcased.