Making the Music for *ViaggIAccademici*

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How can human and artificial intelligence converge within a shared creative endeavour capable of giving musical expression to a theatrical work on artificial intelligence? This piece presents an autoethnographic account by musicologist and composer Mattia Merlini, documenting his experience in composing the stage music for *ViaggIAccademici* – a play addressing academic concerns regarding ChatGPT, conceived and written with the assistance of the same AI system. In seeking to translate the musical ideas emerging from an extended dialogue between ChatGPT and musicologist Maurizio Corbella, Merlini adopted the principal guidelines proposed by the AI, populating a general structural framework with musical materials generated or elaborated through AI-based tools. The breadth of these suggestions resulted in the production of both MIDI files and ready-made phonograms, as well as specific AI-mediated decisions concerning timbre, structure, software and arrangement, and the employment of AI-assisted mastering techniques. Throughout this process, the role of the human composer remained essential – particularly in the selection of materials, the formulation of a coherent aesthetic framework, and the adaptation of the final track to the dramaturgical demands of the play and the synchronisation of live performance. As an instance of practice-based research, and in continuity with the GPTheatre Project from which the play originated, this experiment offers a reflection on the evolving relationship between human and machine creativity within a domain traditionally regarded as distinctively and profoundly human.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, computational creativity, digital music production, practice-based research

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My participation in the GPTheatre research project began at a relatively late stage, when the play was almost completely written and most interactions with ChatGPT had already taken place. In the play, there is a scene where the student meets a professor specialised in performance arts. That scene – which also happens to be the last one and provides a crucial development in the play's plot – is largely based on a chat between ChatGPT and a musicologist. That musicologist is Maurizio Corbella, a scholar specialised in film music who, at the time, was also my PhD supervisor. In that chat, he asked GPT to suggest ideas for composing some music for a play resembling the one we were working on. He ended up receiving a wealth of quite detailed instructions, including ideas for the general structure of the piece, its style and influences, and even the software that could be used to achieve those results. When I joined the project, I soon obtained the transcript of the whole chat and began to systematise all the information I found relevant into a coherent musical project. In this brief – and methodologically loose – autoethnography I share the ways in which I have produced the music for *ViaggIAccademici* and briefly elaborate a reflection on human-AI hybrid creativity based on this same account and my first-hand experience.

First of all, let me frame the experiment in the broader context of my background and profile as a scholar and composer. I am not a professional composer or producer but, as a scholar, I have written several papers on music and AI, mostly from a philosophical perspective. My work in this direction is tendentially a very theoretical one, so I was particularly interested in exploring the same issue from a much more practice-led perspective. As a scholar with a background both in Philosophy and in Musicology, I have explored the peculiarities of human creation by contrasting it to the one afforded by the AI. Mostly working together with my colleague Stefano M. Nicoletti, I have argued that the moral panic around AI replacing composers can only survive as long as distorted and

reductionist conceptions of human musical creation stand unquestioned.[1] Despite my lack of formal training in composition, I have been active as a composer for more than a decade in the independent film scene of my homeland, South Tyrol – the northernmost province of Italy. I usually say that I enjoy "doing things with sounds", and it was with this mixed background and general attitude that I tried to interpret the instructions provided by ChatGPT to provide *ViaggIAccademici* with some music. Since the whole play was conceived to merge human and artificial creativity and to address precisely these themes, I wanted to select and elaborate GPT's suggestions in a way that made sense to me – both as a scholar and as an amateur composer. Let me briefly explain how I went about doing that.

One of GPT's recurring ideas was a minimal loop that would become increasingly chaotic and rhythmically decomposed towards the end, as the artificial nature of the student becomes evident. Other elements, such as drones and digital percussions, were to grow progressively more fragmented and deconstructed as the piece evolved, incorporating glitches and minimalistic procedures of variation. Granular synthesis also featured prominently in GPT's instructions, so I really wanted to include that as well! Musical references included Steve Reich, Ryoji Ikeda, Oval, Clint Mansell, Trent Reznor, and Atticus Ross – though GPT mentioned several more artists that could fit into the equation. While I intended to pay explicit tribute to all of these, I think the final result does not sound particularly close to any of them. It's rather a mixture of all those influences, combined with my own sensibility and an external input, obviously coming from the AI. Finding the right role for that input was probably the hardest part, as I initially had the impression that the employment of AI-based tools were taking some control on the creative process from me; but once I realised I could treat them as a quick way to generate a pool of ideas and materials to be reshaped according to my own taste and the dramaturgic needs of the play, everything progressed quite smoothly.

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[1] See, for instance, M. Merlini, S. M. Nicoletti, *Of Flesh and Steel. Computational Creativity in Music and the Body Issue*, in "INSAM: Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology", IV, 2020, pp. 24-42, or the more general M. Merlini, S. M. Nicoletti, *Specchi di carne e cesellatura musicale. Limiti della creatività computazionale tra corpo e coscienza*, in "Odradek: Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics, and New Media Theories", VIII/1, 2022, pp. 141-177. A more comprehensive systematisation of similar positions is in the process of being published in M. Merlini, *Conosci l'AI-tro per conoscere te stesso. Superare concezioni distorte della musica attraverso il confronto con l'IA*, in F. Scigliuzzo, E. Pivetta (ed. by) *Title TBA* [Ricerche AlumniLevi, vol. 4], Edizioni Fondazione Levi, Venezia 2026.

My general approach was to follow GPT's most relevant suggestions while also employing AI-based tools at several levels in producing the track. Indeed, AI can used in very different ways in the musical field, from the most invasively creative to the merely functional. The moral panic surrounding AI these days tends to accept or even promote a loss of distinction between these different uses, as shown by the case of The Beatles' *Now and Then*, that only employed AI tools to isolate John Lennon's vocals from an old demo where other instruments were recorded as well, but still generated mixed reactions from the audience.[2] My idea was to merge most possible approaches in a methodology capable of taking full advantage of AI-aided composition and production tools. So, as the AI suggested, I used Ableton Live 12 as my DAW[3] and platform for the stage performance of the piece (I coincidentally am an Ableton user) and I autonomously decided to incorporate AI-generated samples, AI-assisted mastering plug-ins, and AI-MIDI generation tools to shape my – or our – piece.
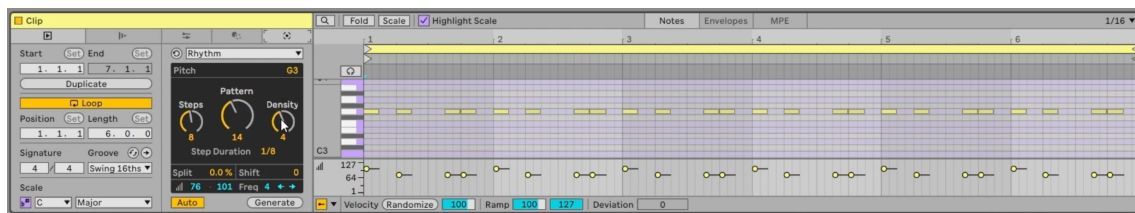

Fig. 1: AI-generated MIDI pattern for the main loop of the track.

The basic pattern of the track is a minimalist loop played on an electric piano. This loop consists of a single note following a pattern generated by Ableton's AI-MIDI tool (Fig. 1). The loop is processed live using a built-in chorus and duplicated twice (with different timbres) to allow me to play with panning and phasing effects on stage. As the different stems desynchronize and disaggregate, and the chorus distorts the original sound, the student's artificial identity becomes clearer to the audience. As mentioned earlier, granular synthesis was central in the original instructions, so I decided to employ it on multiple levels. To do so, I used two plug-ins suggested by ChatGPT, which I happened to own already: Arturia Pigments and the slightly more unorthodox iZotope Stutter Edit. I fed an

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[2] The case has been studied in depth by K. Mancey, *"Feels Icky". Analysing vernacular understanding of music-AI through The Beatles' "Now and Then"*, paper presented at the "First International Conference on AI and Music Studies", KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, 10-12 December 2024.

[3] A DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) is the current standard software solution for music production. It draws together in a digital environment the equivalents of all main tools traditionally found in the analogue recording studio – see, for instance, A. P. Bell, *Dawn of the DAW. The Studio as Musical Instrument*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018 and R. Strachan, *Sonic Technologies. Popular Music, Digital Culture and the Creative Process*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2017.

electric piano sample into Pigments and activated granular synthesis to create a fragmented pad sound used for the eerie motif heard throughout most of the piece. To use Stutter Edit effectively, however, I needed a longer sample, so I generated one with Suno AI, providing a prompt describing a Steve Reich-like pattern. After several attempts, I finally obtained the track that Suno titled *Eternal Patterns*, loosely inspired by Reich's *Drumming* – his most famous composition. From that track, I selected a section that fit the piece and used Stutter Edit to create the granular-like percussive pattern heard in the second half of the composition (Fig. 2). I used the same sample – this time filtered and stretched – to create the high-pitched atmospheric drone that runs throughout the piece.
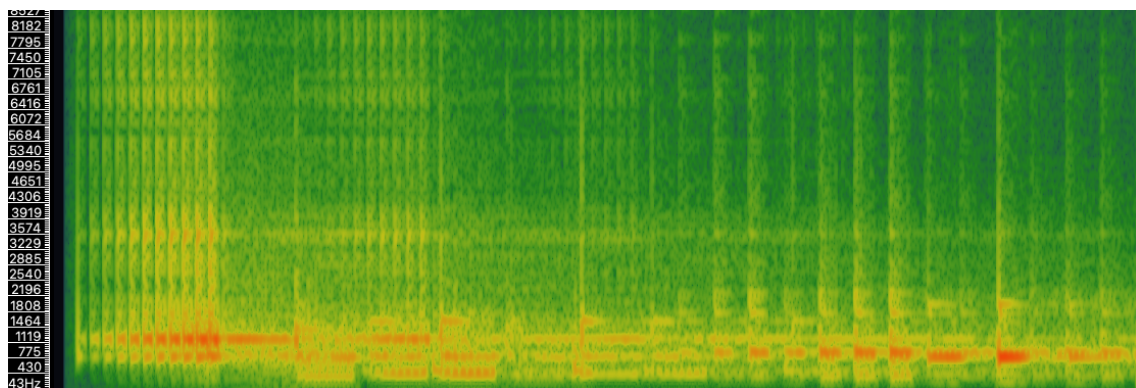

Fig. 2: Spectrogram of the granular-like percussive pattern.

Another line of GPT's instructions concerned glitches and digital sounds, naturally related to the artificial nature of the student and the overall theme of the fiction collapsing. If Steve Reich and Trent Reznor were my main references in the first part of the piece, the second part explores a different musical area, moving more toward Ryoji Ikeda and Oval, so I created a new rhythmic section featuring typically digital percussive sounds (Fig. 3). In this section, the use of AI-generated material was minimal; I mainly followed GPT's guidance by focusing on the overall sound and the processes of layering and stratification. There are several references to the early digital era – perhaps the one that, semiotically speaking, sounds "digital" in the most overt way for most listeners – achieved through Arturia's reproductions of vintage keyboards such as the Roland Jupiter, Fairlight CMI, and Yamaha DX7. As the layers multiply and the original unity of the basic pattern disintegrates, the "cognitive overload" suggested by GPT for the final part of the track is – hopefully – achieved. Finally, the static version of the track (not intended for live performance) also uses iZotope Ozone's AI-assisted mastering tools to give the piece its final shape.
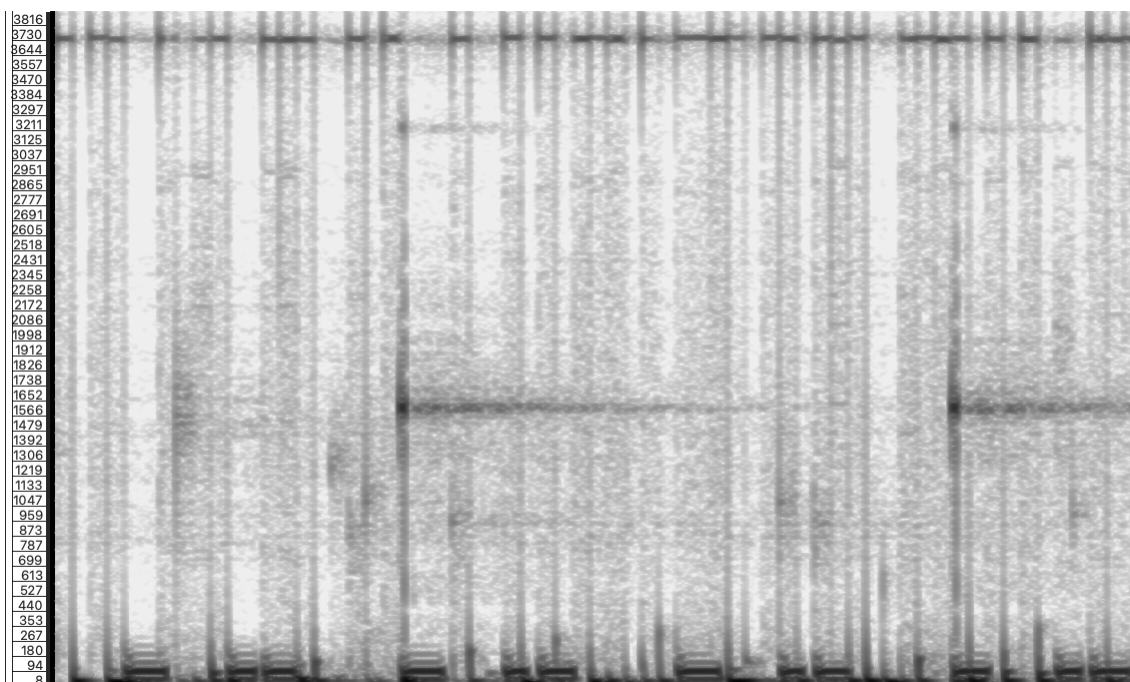
Fig. 3: Spectrogram of the "digital" rhythmic section.

In the end, I am not sure how much of myself and how much of GPT is present in this piece. What is certain is that working on this track has been a valuable way to explore one of my favourite research topics from a practice-based perspective, allowing me to reflect on possible ways to integrate AI and human creativity. Although it was largely a conscious compositional choice to keep the centrality of human agency and direction in the creative process (more machine-centred approaches are possible, as well), I have the impression that without my presence behind the scenes the result would have been entirely different, and probably less capable of adapting to the needs of the play. But I may well be wrong on this. What is more difficult to reject is the fact that an entirely AI-made music would result in a final product with deficiencies perhaps not in its quality or suitability, but in its meaning for other human beings. The relevance of music for humans is rarely reducible to the sole sonic phenomenon; just like every other cultural and artistic effort, it draws most of its value from being a shared human activity.[4] As a little empirical confirmation of this idea, after presenting this work of mine to a seminar in Stockholm,

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[4] Limiting the reference to AI-centred literature on such a central topic for many other perspectives as well, you can find very thought-provoking ideas in P. Dahlstedt, *Musicking with Algorithms. Thoughts on Artificial Intelligence, Creativity, and Agency*, in E. R. Miranda (ed. by) *Handbook of Artificial Intelligence for Music*, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2021, pp. 873-914 and O. Bown, S*ociocultural and Design Perspectives on AI-Based Music Production. Why Do We Make Music and What Changes if AI Makes It for Us?*, in E. R. Miranda (ed. by) *Handbook of Artificial Intelligence for Music*, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2021, pp. 1-20.

in late 2025, I got a feedback stating exactly what I have just argued. It went like: «I probably would not have cared much for the music, if I had not known its background and how you have worked on it, for what reasons and so on».

After all, I think I can still endorse the idea that AIs can only enact processes of "weak computational creativity",[5] just as "weak artificial intelligence" was all machines could get to in John Searle's classic Chinese Room argument.[6] Thus, I think that AI-aided music can be interesting for humans because it speaks about our time and/or specific aesthetic projects that composers want to give birth to, by integrating AI into their music. Even more evidently than other arts, music has always been strictly linked with technology (instruments themselves are fine products of technological advancements), and to refuse the integration of *the* technology of our age in today's music would only result in an outright act of Luddism.

If I look back at the final result of my/our compositional effort, I believe the music blends harmoniously into the play, working in synergy with other aspects that were created in similar ways – including the script and scenography. Moreover, the live DJ-like performance of the track allows me to synchronize with the on-stage action, introducing more human elements into the play through improvisation. This on-going integration of human/natural and mechanic/artificial is the whole point of the project and the play, and so is for the music. I hope the audience will find this musical addition as fitting as I do.

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[5] M. M. Al Rifaie, M. Bishop, *Weak and Strong Computational Creativity*, in T. R. Besold, M. Schorlemmer, A. Smaill (ed. by) *Computational Creativity Research: Towards Creative Machines*, Atlantis, Amsterdam-Paris-Beijing 2015, pp. 37-49.
[6] J. R. Searle, *Minds, Brains, and Programs*, in "Behavioral and Brain Sciences", III/3, 1980, pp. 417-457. In his argument, Searle demonstrates that there are substantial differences between the ways in which humans and machine process meaning and language, especially when it comes to semantics – which is a field that lacks from machines completely. Consequently, Searle argues that there are limits to the evolution of AI in the direction of human intelligence.