

# The Politics of Rammstein's Sound: Decoding a Production Aesthetic

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*Germany's premier rock music export Rammstein has been controversial since its formation in 1994. This article analyses Rammstein's sonic signature from the perspective of the "art of record production". It decodes the politics of Rammstein's sound, which is inextricably linked to the exaggeration of German attributes and the associations attached to them. The findings suggest that although Rammstein productions emphasize some specific German stereotypes in their sound, their overall aesthetic is international. This carefully crafted fine line between exotic otherness and conformity to pop standards has made Rammstein successful on the global pop music market for more than two decades. The production aesthetic must be understood against the background of the band's experience of German reunification. Rammstein were founded as a means for the band members to come to terms with their new "German" identity. Initially, the band dealt with the shock of reunification and the realities of Western capitalist societies. Later the band pursued two further goals: to improve the history of their country in foreign perception and to help the Germans make peace with their nation's past. These goals are achieved by adopting strategies of industrial music for their course, such as provocation, ambiguity, contrast, recontextualization, and humor.*

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## Introduction

When Rammstein released their debut album *Herzeleid* in 1995, it triggered strong reactions, ranging from outrage to euphoria. Their industrial metal sound with German lyrics was new, exciting, and provocative. Rammstein were in an odd situation in their home country Germany, where their albums were indexed as unsuitable for minors while being at the top of the charts. Abroad, in the two main markets for German popular music, the USA and Great Britain, the reception was initially different. The American audience quickly discovered Rammstein. Their second album *Sehnsucht* (1997) sold more than a million copies and climbed to number 45 in the Billboard charts. In the UK, it took Rammstein a third album, *Mutter* (2001), to win the nation over. Since then, each of their studio albums has climbed to a higher position in the charts, culminating at number three with their latest output *Rammstein* in 2019.

Since Rammstein's inception, they polarized with their exaggerated portrayal of Germanness and the associated fascist aesthetics reminiscent of the Nazi era. In 2001, the *Washington Post* wrote, "With jackboot rhythms and plenty of Teutonic rage, the sextet [...] marched out of Germany in 1993 and has been blitzkrieging charts around the globe"<sup>i</sup>. According to Klypchak<sup>ii</sup>, Reed<sup>iii</sup>, and Nye<sup>iv</sup>, it is precisely for this stereotypical militaristic impression the American audience enjoys Rammstein's music. The British reception was more reserved in the beginning, yet the tropes quickly became similar, as a *Kerrang!* review demonstrates: "They may

be as German as two pounds of Bratwurst squeezed into a pair of Lederhosen but that's where Rammstein's real appeal lies – the cold, blunt tones of their mother tongue couldn't have found a more suitable soundtrack in their sublime and regimented sound".<sup>v</sup> In Germany, Rammstein's extreme aesthetic was not particularly well-received, and the newspaper *Die Welt* lamented that the band's exoticizing strategy might even work: "The American lust for the warlike Teuton is well known. Rammstein's biggest disadvantage [...] is, at the same time, their biggest advantage: they sound incredibly German. Too German, as many think".<sup>vi</sup> However, to their dismay, Rammstein's scandalous sound was successful in provocatively capitalizing on stereotypical notions of Germany.

If one characteristic can be attributed to Rammstein, it is ambiguity. Although they refused to explain their lyrics for a long time, they eventually did so. They claimed to be apolitical yet seem to have social and personal intentions. These are grounded in Rammstein's experience of growing up in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), Germany's reunification in 1990, and the shock of becoming part of Western capitalist society. Furthermore, the strong media reactions to Rammstein's aesthetic make them, whether they like it or not, political. It links them, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, to the gruesome history of Germany and the ongoing process of coming to terms with the past.

It is due to the uneasiness about Germany's history that most research on Rammstein was carried out by non-German, mostly North American, or emigrated German scholars. The majority of these studies have been conducted from the perspective of German studies<sup>vii</sup>, media studies<sup>viii</sup>, or exile studies<sup>ix</sup>, but there is relatively little musicological research<sup>x</sup>. Hence the focus of research has been on the interpretation of lyrics and vocal expression, masculinity, and stage performance, and the band's spectacular live shows and music videos have often taken precedence over the music. The band, however, have frequently emphasized that their music is as important as their live shows.

This article offers an alternative to those cultural studies approaches prevalent in popular music studies. Rammstein's sound aesthetic will be analyzed from the perspective of the "art of record production"<sup>xi</sup>. The study aims to decode the politics of Rammstein's sonic signature, which is inextricably linked to the exaggeration of German attributes and the associations attached to them. The investigation combines musicology, critical listening, and the analysis of music artefacts. Band interviews and articles found in music magazines in Germany, Great Britain, and the USA, unauthorized remix stems, the released songs, and video interviews and masterclasses with the band's producer, form the data. The decoding of Rammstein's sonic signature must be done on several levels. Firstly, it is necessary to dissect which typically German characteristics are created in the production, how they are blended with other attributes, and what intentions are possibly pursued in the process. Secondly, the political and aesthetic intentions of the band must be considered against the backdrop of their upbringing in socialist East Germany. Thirdly, it must be discussed how different audiences, German and international, may perceive Rammstein's sound aesthetic. The analysis focuses on the Anglo-American foreign audience, as it is the primary market for Rammstein, besides Central Europe. It is expected that the ambiguous codes and the pluralism of meanings in Rammstein's music are a way of addressing these audiences.

The article situates Rammstein in the historical context of Germany after giving an overview of culturally colored sounds in record production, the economic situation of the recording

industry at the time of Rammstein's formation, and the band's ideological forebears. On that basis, it explains how the past is projected onto Rammstein in public perception and how they are perceived by German, Central European, and Anglo-American audiences. The detailed analysis of Rammstein's sonic signature finally shows a complex aesthetic that borrows from and references various artists and cultural traditions from Germany and abroad. As the analysis will show, although Rammstein productions emphasize some specific German stereotypes in their sound, their overall aesthetic is rather international. This carefully crafted fine line between deliberate exotic otherness and conformity to pop standards distinguishes Rammstein from more conventional rock and metal bands, which has made them successful in the global pop music market for more than two decades. High visibility due to their success enables Rammstein to communicate their political agenda efficiently.

### **Cultural colorations in record production and Rammstein's East German past**

From a historical perspective, globalized sounds in popular music are a rather recent phenomenon that has developed hand in hand with the creation and dissemination of recorded music. The creative potential of multi-track tape recording, utilized since the 1950s, first led to distinct production aesthetics in Great Britain and the USA, until globalization set in during the 1970s.<sup>xii</sup> For Massey, the reasons that contributed to the distinct British and American sounds are not just technical, but sociological:

Despite a political and military alliance that has lasted for two centuries, the cultural differences between the nations are often vast: one a defiant republic, the other a benign monarchy; one based on capitalism, the other with distinct socialist leanings; one a society proud of wearing its emotions on its collective sleeve, the other steeped in the tradition of keeping a "stiff upper lip".<sup>xiii</sup>

In line with Massey's observation, Zagorski-Thomas sees the different class systems of the two nations as fundamental to the distinct recording practices.<sup>xiv</sup> Still rooted in the classical concert tradition, British sound engineers, employed by long-standing record labels such as EMI with their in-house studios, retained traditional recording methods that provided an unmediated experience. In contrast, much of the American popular music was produced in small studios for independent labels. Recording in smaller live rooms resulted in a more controlled and mediated hi-fi sound of US-productions compared to the more spacious but indirect British productions recorded in large rooms like Abbey Road's Studio One.

Until the late 1970s, studio equipment still differed between the two countries due to availability and price.<sup>xv</sup> Apart from the sonic coloration of the mixing consoles, different microphones were used. As the American producer Tony Visconti notes, due to the availability of condenser microphones from German manufacturers such as Neumann and Telefunken, British productions had more high-end frequencies compared to the more direct but muffled American sounds, produced with dynamic microphones from domestic manufacturers such as Shure.<sup>xvi</sup> Another practical problem was the powerline, 110 Hz in America, 220 Hz in Europe, which inspired British manufacturers such as Marshall, VOX, and Orange to produce guitar amplifiers<sup>xvii</sup> by themselves. Those eventually created a "British guitar sound" as an alternative to the "American sound" from Fender and Mesa Boogie.

Massey and Zagorski-Thomas conclude that these national differences, resulting from a combination of social, cultural, and technological factors, decreased during the 1970s. In metal music, cultural differences prevailed until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xviii</sup> Metal emerged in the late 1960s in the USA and the UK and spread to Central Europe in the 1980s. In West Germany, record companies dedicated to metal started by distributing foreign records at better prices. Soon they began signing homegrown bands, and several recording studios specialized in metal established.<sup>xix</sup> These studios had similar equipment to their international counterparts<sup>xx</sup>, primarily due to the previous boom of the *Neue Deutsche Welle* in the early 1980s.<sup>xxi</sup> Inspired by the rock group The Scorpions (since 1965) and the proto-Teutonic metal band Accept (since 1968), German metal influenced the first metal wave outside the Anglo-American world. Helloween's *Walls of Jericho* (1985) contributed to the developing European metal<sup>xxii</sup>, and their double album *Keeper of the Seven Keys* (1987, 1988) left a clear mark on the British scene.<sup>xxiii</sup> The main reason for Helloween's international success was its originality, followed by associations with "classical" music, notably Richard Wagner.<sup>xxiv</sup> Asked about their experience with the "unwillingness on the part of British and American rock fans to give their full support to a band not from either of those two countries"<sup>xxv</sup>, Helloween guitarist Michael Weikath elucidated:

On the one hand it is a difficulty. On the other hand, one advantage of coming from Germany is that you are something special. There have been so many bands coming from Britain, and there are thousands of them in the States, that it's not special anymore. [...] One of my biggest concerns has been how to break into Britain. We know you've got to be original and got to be the way you are. If they feel it's some kind of "set-up", or just image, people in Britain won't go for it.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Not all German metal bands followed this authentic approach. Groups like Grave Digger, Thunderhead, and even Accept sold themselves to an American aesthetic and failed badly because they were perceived as an inferior copy.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The rock music scene in the German Democratic Republic was completely different. In this communist-leaning country, musicians needed a license to perform live, which was only granted for music with German lyrics conforming to socialist ideology.<sup>xxviii</sup> Censorship was common practice by the state, which however was thwarted by subversive ambiguity among artists.<sup>xxix</sup> With only one state-owned record label, few recording studios and producers existed, let alone those specializing in metal music.<sup>xxx</sup> Rock music from the capitalist West was only obtainable through tape-trading and radio stations from beyond the Wall.<sup>xxxi</sup> One must acknowledge this background to understand Rammstein's aesthetics, as the band members have stressed on many occasions. Rammstein guitarist Richard Kruspe once stated:

I think my style would have been very different as we didn't have access to much Western music. We only had tapes, no vinyl, plus there was a lot of Russian and Eastern-influenced music. I was more drawn to Western music, but everything you hear affects you and is part of your upbringing. I think for sure growing up in West Germany would have been very different.<sup>xxxii</sup>

This upbringing led to a totalitarian aesthetic in Rammstein's work, according to Kruspe, "If you grew up in the East and were confronted with real socialism, at some point you realize that certain structures of totalitarian aesthetics were carried out in the GDR. It's simply an aesthetic that we grew up with".<sup>xxxiii</sup> The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification meant a drastic change for musicians from East Germany. During the GDR, musicians subversively criticized

the state, but with this enemy gone, most bands suddenly lacked musical inspiration.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Furthermore, the audience from the West could hardly relate to such music, as Rammstein keyboardist Christian “Flake” Lorenz recalled, “A GDR band that thinks it’s the light of day. If you played the music to a musician from the West, he would think: What’s the point?”<sup>xxxv</sup> Rammstein’s early reasoning was to develop an individual, provocative style that would set them apart. Their drummer Christoph Schneider explained, “For us, the musical image of the West looked like this: There are a bunch of good musicians, all trying to copy American and English bands, but few really original bands”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Rammstein’s sound, an industrial style of metal with German lyrics and hyper-German, military-like rhythmic articulation, the media soon described as *Neue Deutsche Härte* (New German Hardness).<sup>xxxvii</sup> At a time when metal was in crisis worldwide, when pop-punk and grunge dominated the airtime, Rammstein provided music for “a young generation trying to escape everyday life and career pressures through uncompromising lyrics and hard music”.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In Germany, the domestic music industry was in serious decline, and Polygram’s president Wolf-D. Gramatke saw the solution in internationally successful bands, “What we need in the future are new artists who are capable of making it into the national and international charts and who have sufficient staying power in the long term”.<sup>xxxix</sup> Rammstein seemed to be the most promising contender for this role, according to Petra Husemann, the artist and repertoire manager, who signed the band, “It was never a question whether Rammstein would have foreign success. The question was whether a label could be found which would recognize Rammstein’s potential and be willing to handle a band which doesn’t get so much radio or TV exposure”.<sup>xl</sup> Rejecting the capitalist West, the musicians were nonetheless determined to get away from their punk background and make Rammstein a commercial success.<sup>xli</sup> It is this biographical background, the changes caused by the German reunification, and the economic struggles of the recording industry against which Rammstein’s oeuvre must be interpreted.

### **Ideological forebears: industrial music and Laibach**

Before we turn to the politics of German popular music, it is important to place Rammstein in a broader ideological and artistic context. Musically, Rammstein’s prototypical *Neue Deutsche Härte* style is partly based on industrial music. Simon Reynolds regards industrial music as the “most content-heavy and intent-heavy form of music ever”.<sup>xlii</sup> In his critical history of industrial music, Alexander Reed<sup>xliii</sup> draws on the French situationist Guy Debord<sup>xliv</sup> to explain one of the genre’s central strategies for social criticism, *détournement*, which is used to turn “the words, symbols, and actions of authorities back on themselves, recontextualized”. According to Reed, *détournement* is employed to free societies from unwritten rules by revealing and breaking them.<sup>xlv</sup> Debord argues that *détournement* “has a peculiar power which [...] stems from the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old and new senses”.<sup>xlvi</sup> He further claims that the “distortions introduced in the detoured elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a *détournement* is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements”.<sup>xlvii</sup> One of the main effects of using *détournement* in industrial music is ambiguity, essentially in terms of politics and attitudes towards technology. *Détournement* can often take the form of a “cut-up”, the recontextualizing, remixing, and juxtaposition of signs and texts,

and it is a common technique in industrial music.<sup>xlviii</sup> The criticism expressed in industrial music is embedded in extreme aesthetics, which are usually fascist and totalitarian. Musically, a totalitarian aesthetic is often realized through quantized marching rhythms, disturbing lyrics, and samples of political recordings.<sup>xlix</sup> Ambiguity is the key, and most industrial music aims to criticize authority without proposing a substitute, since dictating meaning, interpretation, or action would violate the principle of industrial music to empower its listeners to think for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Rammstein, who have adopted only a few musical elements from industrial music, still make use of the genre's strategies, especially ambiguity and extreme aesthetics. There were other German industrial bands, Kraftwerk, Einstürzende Neubauten, Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft (D.A.F.), and Die Krupps, who have reinforced the connection between industrial music and German national identity.<sup>li</sup> By emphasizing their Germanness through similar aesthetics and singing in German, Rammstein inevitably evoke associations with industrial music.

The Slovenian avant-garde rock band Laibach is one of the biggest inspirations for Rammstein. They established the blueprint of a comprehensive totalitarian aesthetic in their music, videos, and live performance, which Rammstein and other representatives of the *Neue Deutsche Härte* were eventually to adopt.<sup>lii</sup> Although Laibach are not limited to the industrial genre, they criticized the Yugoslav authoritarian state with strategies employed by industrial artists, such as hyper-ambiguity, alienation, mirroring its ideology in exaggerated form,<sup>liii</sup> and adopting totalitarian elements like anonymity and collectivism.<sup>liiv</sup> As the Slovenian philosopher and Laibach supporter Žižek explains, "The way really to subvert a system [...] is not to criticize its official values et cetera, but to expose this hidden reverse of it".<sup>liv</sup>

Laibach and other industrial bands experimenting with electronic sounds and drum machines influenced Rammstein by their use of repetitive rhythms as a sonic signifier of mass culture. Such culture Laibach criticized in a critical theory tradition.<sup>li</sup> Rammstein made this mechanical, stiff rhythm part of their signature sound, without adopting Laibach's critical, academic stance. Another influence on Rammstein, according to Nye, is Laibach's play on the Anglo-American and European prejudice of German bad taste: "Laibach's use of the German text in an exaggerated, proto-Death metal voice is a shocking satire of Teutonic stereotypes of bad taste, where the German tongue is imagined to possess guttural, disgusting, militaristic sounds utterly unsuited for Anglo-American light pop entertainment".<sup>li</sup> As Nye argues, this exaggeration of the Germanic is "the most extreme use of the ugly to critique the beautiful"<sup>liii</sup>. This strategy follows the extreme aesthetics of industrial music, in which the German language and various forms of bad taste are deliberately used – something that Rammstein adopted on their first album and have kept ever since. The most blatant signifier, according to Nye, is Rammstein's adoption of Laibach's use of the German LTI ("Lingua Tertii Imperii" or "Language of the Third Reich"), expressed by the thrilled Hitlerian "Rs".<sup>li</sup> The associations with Nazi Germany resemble the extreme aesthetics of industrial music. Rammstein built on Laibach's avant-garde aesthetics and some strategies of industrial music. Notwithstanding all their extremism and totalitarian aesthetics in sound, imagery, and stage presentation, there are scholars seeing Rammstein's political intention less serious than those of their forbears. Luke<sup>lx</sup> claims that politics is only an occasional interest, and Nye<sup>lxi</sup> argues that Rammstein's "totalitarian desires in a spectacle of Hollywood theatricality [...] is not supposed to have consequences". Laibach themselves stated without resentment that Rammstein copied their aesthetic

for commercial gain without taking a critical stance.<sup>lxii</sup> Laibach supporter Žižek, however, does not agree with this assessment.<sup>lxiii</sup> Drawing on Lacan's concept of "sinthomes", the non-semantic dimension of a symbol, he argues that Rammstein "de-semanticize" totalitarian ideology and thus do not support it, but do precisely the opposite:

by pushing their listeners into a direct identification with the *sinthomes* used by the Nazis, by-passing their articulation in Nazi ideology, they render palpable a gap where ideology imposes the illusion of seamless organic unity. In short, Rammstein *liberates* these *sinthomes* from their Nazi-articulation: they are offered to be enjoyed in their pre-ideological status as "knots" of libidinal investment.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Žižek does not consider Rammstein's extreme aesthetic ideological but claims they "undermine totalitarian ideology not with an ironic distance towards the rituals they imitate, but by directly confronting us with its obscene materiality and thereby suspending its efficacy".<sup>lxv</sup> Rammstein detourne in a simple manner that clearly juxtaposes the old with the new sense.<sup>lxvi</sup> In using similar means to Laibach to criticize totalitarian ideology, the band may be more political than Lukes and Nye acknowledge. Whether it is political intentions or pure commercial strategy that motivate Rammstein to use German signifiers and fascist aesthetics in their music will be discussed in the subsequent investigation.

### **The politics of German popular music and the projection surface Rammstein**

Most interviews and media reports about Rammstein in Germany deal with the political views of the band and Germany's past. In one of these interviews, Landers stated:

If you are completely honest, you are reminded of "German". I wouldn't always mention German and the Third Reich in the same breath. Goethe, Schiller, Mozart, and Ernst Busch are also German, and they have nothing to do with the Third Reich. I firmly reject the assertion that most Germans think that being German always means the Third Reich. [...] Alright, if you need to put a label on us: We make evil German marching music. I can't say anything against that. If it reminds you, be it so. But the question is, when is music right-wing without lyrics? Can a note be right-wing? Can a note be German? How much German can one be?<sup>lxvii</sup>

This quotation raises two questions. First, what is the smallest "musical unit" perceived as political? On a purely structural level, a single note will not be sufficient, yet depending on its sound, it could have political undertones. Attali<sup>lxviii</sup> reminds us of the political power of music and noise, which is employed strategically in industrial music.<sup>lxix</sup> The second question concerns the common right-wing association of a German sound; in what way may musicians emphasize their German identity? It seems sensible to compare East and West German metal once more.

When West German metal bands created an own interpretation of the genre, many musicians and producers did not mind using "Teutonic stereotypes" despite the derogative connotations of bluntness, rigidity, and hardness.<sup>lxx</sup> Producers such as Karl Bauerfeind deliberately developed a "Teutonic metal sound" based on their imagination of the militaristic sound of the Prussian Empire, associated with marching music and marching in lockstep.<sup>lxxi</sup> As is shown elsewhere<sup>lxxii</sup>, this aesthetic involved engineering and production decisions to emphasize rhythmic precision. However, the resulting sound was not particularly popular in the Anglophone world, as a *Kerrang!* review exemplifies:

Running Wild are so German it's unbelievable! Their music is precise, clinical and very heavy. The stuff that armies march to. Enjoyment in a regimented, serious manner. Bombastic? Wagnerian? You betcha! [...] I think maybe you've just got to feel this music in the blood to really get off on it.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Despite these disparaging tones, no major West German metal band has ever been accused of right-wing leanings except for Accept, who were criticized in France for the characteristic camouflage dress of singer Udo Dirkschneider. Generally, German metal with English lyrics, corresponding to the traditional themes of metal music, was perceived as stale but did not cause any controversies.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

At the heart of the controversies surrounding Rammstein is the emphasis on their German identity in their music, lyrics, and performances in the form of an exaggerated totalitarian aesthetic reminiscent of the Nazi era – similar to Laibach's artistic expression of their experience with their Slovenian identity in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the long-standing assimilation of Slovene culture into the Germanic sphere, and the Yugoslavian split in the ideological space between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>lxxv</sup> Rammstein claim to be still searching for their identity, even thirty years after Germany's reunification. These struggles become apparent in the opening track "Deutschland" ("Germany") on their latest album. In a *Metal Hammer* interview Christoph Schneider explained the motivation for the song:

For me, the song is about the ambivalent emotional relationship with this country. People from my generation can understand that. First it was two countries, suddenly one was gone. There were also times when I couldn't get the word "Germany" over my lips. There was the Federal Republic of Germany, and the German Democratic Republic, not Germany. I'm coping better with it now. It's a topic that's occupied us for ages. German lyrics with hard music – that's what we stand for. And now we have managed to make a song about Germany, this is a big step for the band.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

Growing up in the East or West, before or after reunification, determines how Germans perceive their country, yet the problem of identification is nothing new. In the nineteenth century, German culture was subject to significant changes, which led to the unified German Empire in 1871. In this context, popular music composers dealt with the question of nationality. Richard Wagner attempted to create an image of Germany in his writings "Was ist Deutsch?" ("What Is German?")<sup>lxxvii</sup> and *Deutsche Kunst und deutsche Politik (German Art and German Politics)*<sup>lxxviii</sup>. His deliberations on a united Germany culminated in the music drama *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867), an "attempt to forge collective memory" and the "very emblem of a nation".<sup>lxxix</sup> This pronounced national image and the work's popularity prompted the Nazis to adopt the *Meistersinger* for their ideology in the years before the Second World War. In a radio broadcast in 1933, the German Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels described it as "the incarnation of our national identity"<sup>lxxx</sup>, and from 1935, Hitler politicized it further by demanding it as a regular feature of the Nuremberg party rallies.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Wagner's engagement with German identity and his work's misappropriation show several parallels to Rammstein. According to various interview statements, one of Rammstein's main motivations is to overcome the inglorious history of their nation, not only for themselves but for the German people. However, their political intentions shifted throughout their career. Initially, Rammstein's provocative style was intended to criticize the capitalist West, as Landers expressed, "You probably didn't really like the GDR because you lived in it. It was the same for me. Then I saw the whole superficial surface in the West and thought, 'You have to destroy

that”<sup>lxxxii</sup>. Later, their focus shifted to united Germany and coping with its problematic past. As per Landers, “The German has an identification problem due to the crimes committed by the Nazis. [...] This also means that there is no longer a normal way of dealing with life before and after”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>, and bassist Oliver Riedel added, “People must finally learn that being German and being fascist are two different things. We use German symbols in our appearances, but we have no connection whatsoever with Nazi or neo-Nazi ideology, we are neither right nor left, we are also not fascists, we reject this”<sup>lxxxiv</sup>. These statements show a clear parallel to Laibach’s use of industrial strategies like *détournement* and Žižek’s reading of Rammstein, according to which the band undermines totalitarian ideology through confrontation with its “obscene materiality”<sup>lxxxv</sup>. Rammstein want to encourage a “natural dealing with our past and reasonable dealing with this country”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> by using extreme fascist aesthetics and exaggerating their Germanness to the point of provocation<sup>lxxxvii</sup>. It is not intended for the Germans to forget about the past but to make peace with it and acknowledge the rich cultural heritage of music, literature, and art, whose references they covertly weave into their music.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> However, just as the Nazis appropriated Wagner’s popular work for their right-wing propaganda, Rammstein’s ambiguity, popularity, and populist themes made them vulnerable to appropriations by right-wing groups. That has been the problem in East Germany. Similar to the attempts to annex Laibach’s music for their cause in the early 1990s<sup>lxxxix</sup>, the neo-Nazis tried to adopt Rammstein in the mid and late ‘90s, which contributed significantly to Rammstein’s right-wing image so often reported by the media.<sup>xc</sup>

There are further parallels to Wagner in the aural and visual representation of the band. Kahnke reads Rammstein as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>xc</sup>, a Wagnerian concept in which every aspect of music, stage, and show is meticulously designed and aligned. The resulting aesthetic has been described in German research as *Ästhetik der Überwältigung*, roughly translated as “aesthetics of overwhelming”, after the psychologist Richard Müller-Freienfels.<sup>xcii</sup> According to Wicke, Rammstein perfected this aesthetic, which captivates the listener with the immense power of sound and showmanship.<sup>xciii</sup> Although Wicke does not make this connection, it could be argued that the negative reception in Germany is caused by “overwhelming media” that is reminiscent of Nazi propaganda because of their manipulating effect, reinforced by the rolled “R” of singer Till Lindemann, which was characteristic for Hitler and Goebbels in their address to the public. This aesthetic, according to Nye, was a “media spectacle” and still widely evokes traumatic memories.<sup>xciv</sup> Just as rhetoric can be abused, a captivating sound resulting from high-quality music production can make people enjoy the sound of music whose lyrics contradict their beliefs. This juxtaposition of pleasurable, captivating sound and disturbing lyrics fits the extreme aesthetic of industrial music to stimulate or enforce reflection, as Laibach have demonstrated.<sup>xcv</sup>

Rammstein’s style, which became the blueprint of the *Neue Deutsche Härte*, is a special case in terms of political associations in popular music. According to the German *Metal Hammer*’s editor Robert Müller, political messages are usually presented in musical styles that are not too controversial themselves. That does not apply to *Neue Deutsche Härte* because it was “automatically not politically correct since it received its aesthetic appeal through German elements in its sound”<sup>xcvi</sup>. A sound emphasizing German qualities was per se politically inappropriate in public perception in Germany after the Second World War. Müller’s assessment clearly shows the Germans’ unease with their past, which Rammstein intend to break. They are

not alone in this; the German composer of contemporary classical music, Torsten Rasch, publicly defended the band in an opinion piece in the *Rolling Stone* magazine: “What Rammstein do is art, and as such it should be received. The band plays with symbols to provoke, something every opera director does nowadays. For me, provocation is an essential task of art. It makes you think”.<sup>xcvii</sup> The media reactions in Germany suggest that Rammstein’s use of *détournement* is still effective after several albums.

The importance of differentiating between audiences is apparent by the fact that it is precisely this controversial and exaggerated form of Germanness that Anglo-American listeners enjoy<sup>xcviii</sup>, without necessarily perceiving Rammstein’s aesthetic as overly political. It is parallel to Laibach’s music, which Yugoslavian, Austrian, and German audiences perceived more critically than other audiences because they understood the references and meanings.<sup>xcix</sup> As for Rammstein’s appeal to an Anglophone audience, Nye theorizes the fascination of exaggerated Germanness with the term “Teutonic”, which for him is less a distinct style than a complex aesthetic that encompasses a range of ideologies and media.<sup>c</sup> The term goes way back to nineteenth-century England. It has ever since been used for anything Germanic, especially in connection with imperialist ambitions of reunified Germany, the strength of the Prussian military, and Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, all of which challenged the British Empire.<sup>ci</sup> Nye understands the Anglo-American fascination with the “Teutonic” as a “special kind of Occidentalism within the Occident”, taking the form of an “exotic representation of German nationality or a German cultural product [...] as something alternatively dangerous, perverse, violent, inhuman and/or enigmatic”.<sup>cii</sup> English and American war propaganda during both wars accounted for the connotation of the “Teutonic” as evil. Nye argues that the “Teutonic” aesthetic still lives on but “has shifted from a demonization of the German per se to a trope in which the Anglo-American world articulates a range of fears and anxieties about its own political and cultural position in the world since 1945”.<sup>ciii</sup> Consequently, Nye explains the Anglo-American attraction to Rammstein with their desire for an experience of exoticism and otherness<sup>civ</sup>, coupled with Rammstein’s adherence to the German stereotype of “bad taste”. This reading of the “Teutonic” suggests that bands like Rammstein, who capitalize on their “Teutonic identity” or Germanness, are not perceived too politically by an Anglo-American audience. By the thrill of the exotic otherness without being too different, Rammstein appeals to audiences in the Global North.

With his interpretation of Rammstein’s single “Du Hast” (1997), Reed<sup>cv</sup> gives some insights into why an American audience enjoys the song precisely because of its distinctly German character. For him, four qualities – epic, military, romantic, and technological – are essential to the North American experience of Germanness. Rammstein’s *epic* quality results from a variety of spatial and compositional means, such as the reverberated room quality of a cathedral and the vocal arrangements, both of which he associates with Romantic and Classical music. This reading is perhaps in itself a sign of an American interpretation since these qualities are hardly unique to German music. He sees the *romantic* quality in structural elements such as the “Wagnerian leaps of sixths”, characteristic of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* or the *Lacrimosa* of Mozart’s *Requiem*. Reed identifies further German characteristics in Lindemann’s singing style, according to which Americans feel reminded of the cultural, romantic tradition of European opera. European research does not make this connection. The *military* quality is achieved through a marching style rhythm in which the emphasis is on the first beat

of each measure, particularly in the drum playing, which contrasts with the upbeat accentuation typical in Anglo-American rock music. This militaristic sense of rhythm is supported by the phrasing of the guitars and the unpitched and rhythmically accentuated singing that overemphasizes the hard consonants. The synchronization of the drums, guitars, and vocals create an emotionally harsh sound associated with military orders.<sup>cv</sup> That not only accords with the aesthetic strategies of West German “Teutonic metal” but also with interpretations of Lindemann’s vocal style by other American scholars.<sup>cvii</sup> The fourth distinct German quality is *technological*. Reed argues that the distorted guitar “resembles the sound of scraped or pounded metal”, which leads him to equate this guitar sound with the sound of machines. Similarly, he views the distorted drum sound and the cold synthesizer sound as an abstraction from humanly produced sound, which makes Rammstein’s aesthetic industrial and inhuman. This argument fits Nye’s reading of the “Teutonic” perception among Anglo-Americans as the German being robotic, hyperrational, and rigid.<sup>cviii</sup> Relevant in the context of Rammstein’s sonic signature is that Reed highlights the production as the crucial element in staging Germanness in their music since it affects the sonic space, performance qualities, and the sound of instruments, vocals, and the record as a whole.

### **Rammstein’s musical development**

Rammstein’s style has changed throughout their 25-year career. Although pioneering the sound of *Neue Deutsche Härte*, they built on an older tradition. Laibach served as inspiration for various aspects of Rammstein’s aesthetic, including the mixture of electronic and metal music and the rolling “R”.<sup>cix</sup> Another foreign influence was the American industrial metal band Ministry, who showed Rammstein how to commercialize Laibach’s concept in a metal aesthetic by using “heavily quantised guitar riffs and drumming as well as an aggressive use of digital editing and cutting”<sup>cx</sup>, a form of the “cut-up” technique of industrial music and *détournement*. Inspirational crossover metal bands from West Germany include Die Krupps and Oomph!, who partly sang in German and combined EBM beats with catchy keyboard melodies and aggressive guitars.<sup>cx</sup> Die Krupps, named after Germany’s most important weapons manufacturer in both world wars, also dealt with their country’s past, albeit less ambiguously than Rammstein to avoid right-wing accusations.<sup>cxii</sup> The German *Neue Deutsche Welle* band Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft (D.A.F.) inspired combining synthesizer pads and pumping beats with new wave, especially with their hit “Der Mussolini” (1981).<sup>cxiii</sup>

Rammstein preferred European artists. Kraftwerk served as a role model, not only for their techno-mechanical “Teutonic rhythm”<sup>cxiv</sup>, but also for their political reception, as Kruspe explained:

When you talk to people today about German bands abroad, one name always comes up: Kraftwerk. They had the same problem as we did, to be pushed into this right corner, simply because they were German and had created their own music. I see many parallels between Kraftwerk and Rammstein. Today Kraftwerk is the German model band. It would be crazy if we could achieve that.<sup>cxv</sup>

The first two Rammstein albums *Herzeleid* (1995) and *Sehnsucht* (1997) most clearly pay homage to Germany’s electronic history, which is why they should be treated differently from the band’s later sound. Crucial for the two sounds was the production team that changed between

*Sehnsucht* and *Mutter* (2001). Not familiar with the role of a producer because, according to Lorenz, they simply did not exist in the East German rock music scene<sup>cxvi</sup>, Rammstein's only criterion was that he or she did not come from West Germany.<sup>cxvii</sup> Wishing for someone with an international sound, they approached the British producer Greg Hunter (Depeche Mode, The Orb, Killing Joke), who declined because the band did not convince him.<sup>cxviii</sup> The finally chosen Swede Jacob Hellner proved to be decisive for Rammstein's characteristic *Tanz-Metall* (dance metal) style.<sup>cxix</sup> Similarly influential was the Belgian mixing engineer Roland Prent (Def Leopard, Iron Maiden, Queensrÿche), who claims to have created the "early Rammstein sound".<sup>cxx</sup> The sound of their third album *Mutter* (2001) changed with a new vision of a less electronic and more sophisticated arrangement<sup>cxxi</sup>, mixed by the relatively unknown Swede Stefan Glauermann. Although *Rammstein* (2019) was created with a new production team, Tom Dalgety (Ghost, Royal Blood) and Olsen Involtni (Rammstein's live audio engineer), the sound is relatively similar to their previous albums. Considering Rammstein's musical development, all albums except *Herzeleid* and *Sehnsucht* are considered in the following analysis of the Rammstein signature.

### **Rammstein's sonic signature**

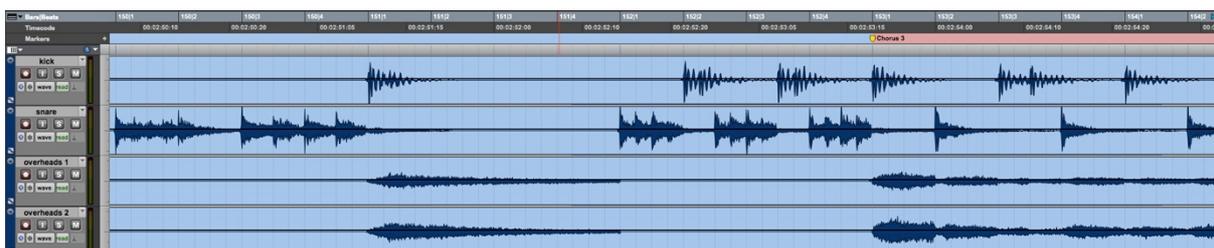
In keeping with their socialist upbringing, each Rammstein song is a collective doing of all six members.<sup>cxxii</sup> As the band stated in several interviews, all instrumentalists compose and record song elements that are shared and developed. The guitar riff is the center of the creative process, and the lyrics are written to the finished music.<sup>cxxiii</sup> This approach is common in metal, but given the above-average importance of the lyrics in Rammstein's aesthetic concept, it is noteworthy. Once the songs are written, the band enters a lengthy pre-production phase of one to two years.<sup>cxxiv</sup> The band rehearses the performance and improves the arrangement under the guidance of their producer who provides regular feedback in the last months before the recording.<sup>cxxv</sup> During this time, the number of songs is reduced from about 30 to 18. According to Hellner, this pre-production time spent in the rehearsal room is the most important phase of the creation of a Rammstein album.<sup>cxxvi</sup> Unlike many other artists, Rammstein enter the studio with fully arranged songs and rehearsed performances.<sup>cxxvii</sup> At the end of pre-production, all electronic elements are finished, and what remains doing is to replace the guide tracks with the real recordings. This way, the band has a clear idea of how the record will sound before they enter the studio.<sup>cxxviii</sup> During the recording process, 11 from the 18 tracks are chosen, the programmatic number on each Rammstein album. The ones sorted out did not capture the desired feeling in a high-quality, recorded format. In this respect, Rammstein's production approach is much more tradition-conscious than one might expect.

Audio engineering is crucial to the sound of a metal record. In the global trend to create hyper-real impressions, the focus is on mixing rather than recording.<sup>cxxix</sup> Given the transgressive image of Rammstein, it is surprising that they rely on conventional engineering and emphasize the recording stage. In most metal productions the producer takes on all engineering tasks. Rammstein, however, follow the traditional model.<sup>cxxxi</sup> The creative oversight is the producer's role and the recording, editing, mixing, and mastering that of specialized engineers.<sup>cxli</sup> Since these specialists come from different countries, they contribute to an international sound without culture-specific characteristics, if these still exist.

Drums are the instrument in metal music that is most processed towards hyper-reality by enhancing or replacing the acoustic sounds with pre-processed samples, usually from other drum kits.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> In a video-recorded masterclass, Hellner explains the recording and production process of “Ich Tu Dir Weh” (2009), demonstrating a meticulous but traditional production approach.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> The main drum sound is captured with a combination of a wide AB overhead microphone setup, supported by three stereo room tracks at different distances from the kit, and another chamber stereo track. The kick is recorded with microphones inside and outside the resonance head, a sub kick tunnel microphone, and a trigger clip for computer-based sample enhancement. The snare is captured from the top, bottom, the air pressure hole, and with a more distanced “dirt microphone”. Both the kick and snare tracks are duplicated for parallel processing to achieve a more natural sound. The four toms are neither gated nor edited so that the spill from the rest of the drum kit remains on the tracks. The actual tom hits are reinforced with samples. The two hi-hats and the ride cymbal have spot microphones. This setup amounts to a total of 39 drum channels. The main drum sound, sticking to traditional engineering practice, comes from the overheads, arranged in a way that the kick and snare drum are in the stereo center for maximum power. The drums are not panned as wide as typical in metal<sup>cxxxiv</sup> thus not setting the vertical boundaries of the band’s wall of sound.<sup>cxxxv</sup> Similarly, the overhead and room tracks dominating over the close-microphoned drum instruments create a sound that is less direct than in most contemporary metal productions.<sup>cxxxvi</sup>

Hellner does not replace drum instruments with external samples but reinforces specific notes with sampled hits from the original drum kit. The samples are recorded at multiple volumes and played with both hands to capture their velocities and the place the batter head is struck. This high degree of sound detail is unusual in metal music production but, for Hellner, it makes the drum sound “less mechanical”. To reduce the mechanical impression even further, he does not enhance the drums in sparsely arranged form parts that contain many ghost notes, only in dense form parts like the chorus, where the drums compete with the wall of guitar.

This unexpected tradition-conscious recording approach and Hellner’s concern for natural, non-mechanic drum sounds is remarkable given the rigid rhythmical qualities crucial to Rammstein’s stereotypical German aesthetic. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the original kick and snare drum of “Waidmanns Heil” (2009). The drum instruments are rigidly quantized to a sixteenth note grid, which creates one of Rammstein’s characteristic ambiguities: a natural and rather traditional sounding drum kit that is played as rigidly to the beat like a drum computer. The stiff, quantized performance corresponds to the centuries-old rhythmic stereotypes of German music.<sup>cxxxvii</sup> Even “Du Hast” (1997) from Rammstein’s second album is similarly quantized, which is astonishing since Pro Tools’s quantization tool Beat Detective was only introduced in 2000. This observation confirms drastic manual editing as part of the Rammstein production aesthetic based on audio evidence.



*Figure 1. Drums quantized rigidly to a 16<sup>th</sup> note grid in “Waidmanns Heil”*

Rammstein’s drum sound differs from West German metal bands who tend to tune their kick and snare drums as low as possible. In the aesthetic of those bands, the kick emphasizes the downbeat similar to Prussian marches. The deep snare sound follows the aesthetic of the two most influential rock bands in Germany, The Scorpions and Accept. This combination of “cannon” (kick) and “shotgun” (snare), according to Bauerfeind<sup>cxxxviii</sup>, is decisive for the militaristic aesthetic of the West German interpretation of a “Teutonic metal sound”. Rammstein also strived for a deep drum sound, yet, as Hellner explained in his masterclass, the wall of guitars makes it impossible. Their drum tuning is thus closer to a British metal sound, which tends to be pitched higher than the West German sound, but lower than the drum sound of many US-metal bands.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

Besides the characteristic voice of singer Till Lindemann and the mechanical drums, the guitars are an iconic sonic element of Rammstein<sup>cxl</sup>, forming the powerful wall of sound in the choruses that many artists and producers have tried to copy. Speculations on online message boards have it that Rammstein’s rhythm guitar sound is created by the layering of 24 tracks.<sup>cxli</sup> “Ich Tu Dir Weh” may not be representative of all Rammstein songs, but together with Hellner’s explanations, it offers some insight. Most songs contain four main rhythm guitar performances, two from each guitarist, which has been the standard in metal music production since the 2000s.<sup>cxlii</sup> As is generally known, Kruspe plays an analog Mesa Boogie Rectifier tube amplifier, while Landers plays a digital Tech 21 SansAmp. On the record, the signal of each guitarist is recorded through both amplifiers, totaling in eight main rhythm guitar tracks. According to Hellner, this blend of amplifiers and the way they are placed in the stereo field is one of the “secrets” of Rammstein’s guitar sound. The analog circuit of the Rectifier reacts slower than the digital SansAmp, which sits lower in frequency in the mix. Typically, bass frequencies are slower than higher frequencies, but this unique combination of guitar amplification technology allows the full spectrum to sound simultaneous, increasing the power of the guitar wall. This spectrally homogenous impression is supported structurally since both guitarists tend to play the riffs in unison. For the guitars to sound big on a record, the width can be artificially increased. This processing, however, affects phase correlation, resulting in poorer translation on FM radio, laptop speakers, and mobile phones. Due to this commercial reason, the guitars seem not artificially widened. The alternative of widening the image naturally with different guitar sounds on both channels is neither true, as Figure 2 shows. Both guitars are presented as one unit, and no guitarist can be distinguished. Essential for the stereotypical German impression is the accentuation of rhythm over the spectral qualities of the guitar work.

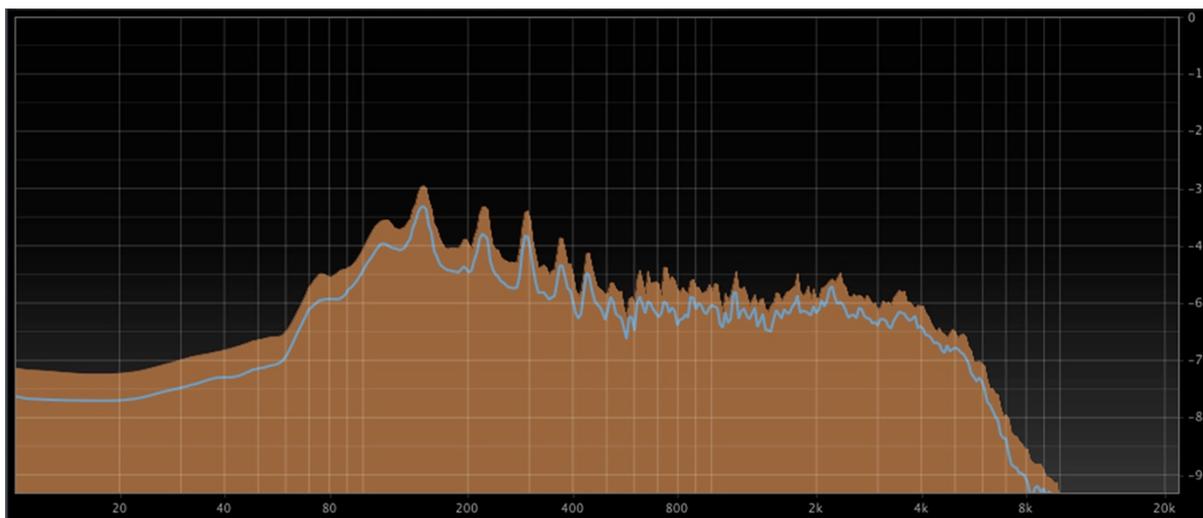


Figure 2. Frequencies of the guitars on the left and right stereo channels

The second “secret” of Rammstein’s guitar sound, according to Hellner, is the arrangement, since this is from where the power comes.<sup>cxliii</sup> The form of most Rammstein songs follows conventional verse, chorus, and bridge structures<sup>cxliiv</sup>, but worth mentioning is the instrumentation. As Landers explained in an interview, most verses are calm to the point of being boring. Thinning out the instrumentation not only improves the intelligibility of the lyrics but creates a more emotionally intensive wall of sound when transitioning to the chorus.<sup>cxliv</sup> In their arrangements, the sectional contrast is higher than in productions of many other metal bands, thereby captivating the listener with an impressive wall of sound. The effect is intensified by the fact that in many songs, the vocals and instruments accentuate the same rhythm, which also contributes to Rammstein’s militaristic impression.<sup>cxlvi</sup>

Guitarists agree that there are British and American amplifiers.<sup>cxlvii</sup> Rammstein’s signature is based on the Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier, one of the most iconic American-sounding amplifiers. This choice of amplifier is noteworthy in that most metal bands from West Germany willingly accepted an endorsement by the German manufacturer Engl and in doing so created a distinctive German guitar sound.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Rammstein decided against this aesthetic. The chosen amplifier impacts profoundly on Rammstein’s production practice, since the recorded guitar tracks, just like the drums, are hardly processed. The sounds are created in the traditional way of placing the microphones to achieve the desired tone at source. For ultimate control, Rammstein use a microphone robot that allows them to store three-dimensional coordinates and select and modify their guitar sounds without touching any processing device.<sup>cxlix</sup> It usually takes three days to find the right microphone positions. As far as the recording chain is concerned, Rammstein use vintage German Neumann large-diaphragm microphones (M49, M149, U47, U67) through a British Neve 1081 pre-amplifier.<sup>cl</sup> Once again, this recording approach is far from transgressive and not particularly “German”, apart from the fact that condenser microphones made in Germany were more common in Europe than in America before the 1980s.

Because of the guitar’s central role, Hellner does not thin out its spectrum to make space for the drums but instead uses samples to help the drums cut through. In many Rammstein songs, the bass serves merely as a support for the guitars, which is common practice in the metal genre. For Rammstein’s aesthetic, the bass in the heavy form parts is reduced to support

the guitars in a lower octave (Figure 3).<sup>cli</sup> Often only a direct injection (DI) track with a bass amplifier simulation plugin, or simply equalization and compression, shapes the sound. While many metal productions add an amplifier sound to the DI track or distort the middle and higher frequencies for character<sup>clii</sup>, Rammstein rarely do this. Merely in the sparsely arranged form parts such as verses and interludes does the bass get a distinct character, but overall there are no cultural references in Rammstein’s bass that would make it stand out.

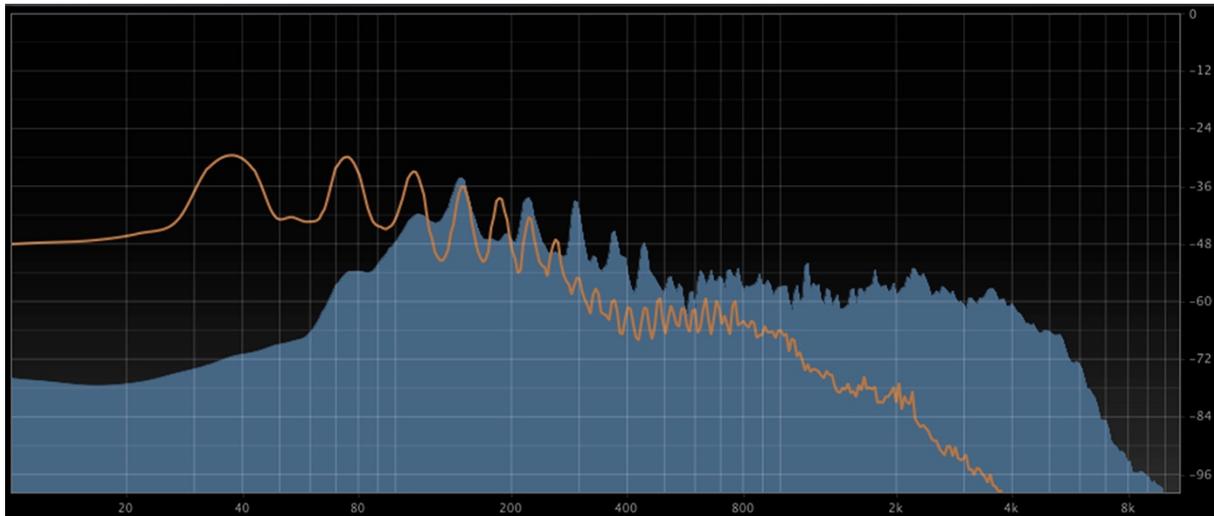


Figure 3. Frequency of the guitars (blue) and bass (orange) in the chorus of “Ich Tu Dir Weh”

Of Rammstein’s musical features, the vocals have received most academic attention because they are the most stereotypical and controversial German trait. Nye emphasizes the “Language of the Third Reich” aesthetic that Rammstein adopted from Laibach<sup>cliii</sup>, which Klemperer<sup>cliv</sup> characterizes as jagged, nappy, and rigid: “A firm military greeting is rigid. An order or an announcement can be rigid. Rigid signifies the exertion of organized discipline”. In a similar vein, Reed points out that the predominance of strong-weak vowel patterns means that Rammstein’s lyrical phrases often begin on musical downbeats, giving their singing an aggressive, technological, and industrial feel.<sup>clv</sup> Much has been written about Lindemann’s masculine, deep, resonant bass register, his trilled “Rs”, brief sentences with guttural sounds, and his use of the half-spoken *Sprechstimme* (“speech-voice”), which traces back to Wagner’s operas and was less common in the Anglophone world.<sup>clvi</sup> The *Sprechstimme* style requires from vocalists to follow a composed rhythm and pitch while singing but leaves it to them to change pitch during spoken passages.<sup>clvii</sup> This vocal style has two effects on Rammstein’s music. Firstly, according to an interview statement by Lindemann, the high degree of rhythmicity of this vocal style affects the guitar work, making it more “march-like”.<sup>clviii</sup> Secondly, Rammstein’s treatment of pitch is unique in the metal genre. According to Hellner, Lindemann is a “great singer, but he can’t really sing, that’s what makes him unique”.<sup>clix</sup> As Hellner further elaborates, due to the lack of any formal training, Lindemann has an original sense of melody and sings notes that do not “exist” in Western music but is an essential part of his unique personality and Rammstein’s sound. The analysis of Lindemann’s singing in “Waidmanns Heil” with the vocal tuning software Celemony Melodyne confirms that Lindemann’s voice is neither tuned with spoken nor with sung articulation, and not even individual notes seem to have been touched. From a commercial point of view, it is remarkable that the vocals are mostly out of tune, and

yet Rammstein’s albums have chart success. This achievement proves that Rammstein have succeeded in establishing an original vocal aesthetic despite not meeting international standards of pop production, where German lyrics<sup>clx</sup> and untuned vocals are an oddity.

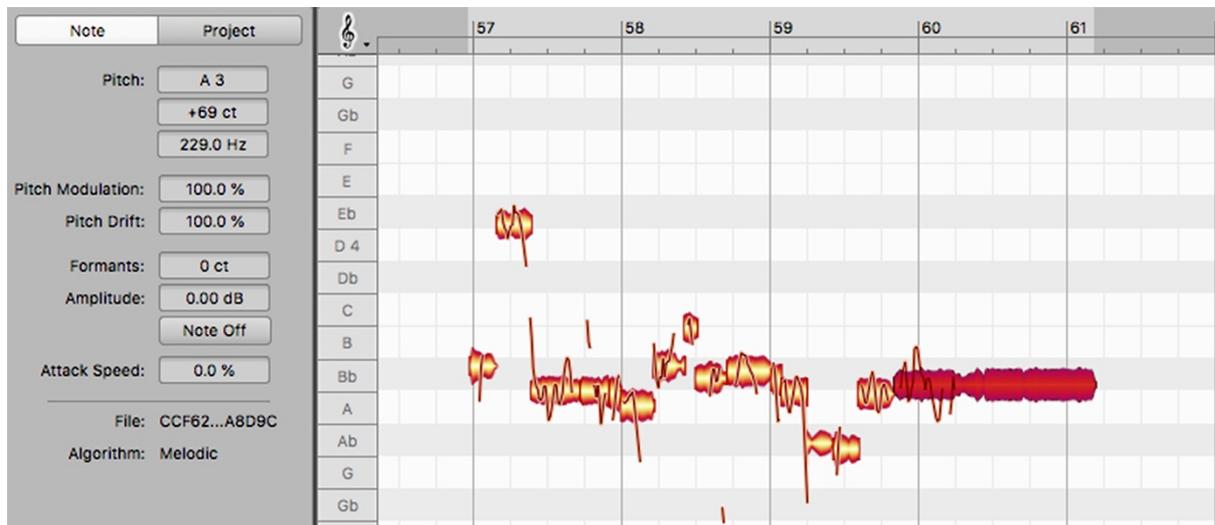


Figure 4. Vocals in the sung pre-chorus of “Waidmanns Heil”

Similar to the traditional recording methods for drums and guitar, the vocal sound is created at source. Usually, more than thirty takes of short vocal phrases are recorded to keep processing to a minimum. The main vocals are not doubled extensively but supplemented by various voices in higher or lower registers and with different phrasings, such as the mixture of noise-like whispers and clean sounds. In the chorus of “Ich Tu Dir Weh”, this results in a total of seven vocal tracks at the same time. The voice heard on the finished record is powerful, despite Lindemann’s singing not being loud. Between the albums, the pre-amplifier changed, but the vocals are always recorded with a vintage German Neumann M49 microphone and compressed with a Danish hardware broadcast compressor, which has an unusually fast response time that makes the voice sound close to the listener.<sup>clxi</sup> As Naomi Cummings, referring to Buddy Holly, notes about vocal engineering, “By altering the balance, dynamic level, and quality of her sounds, the engineers have effectively created for her a musical ‘body’ and identity<sup>clxii</sup>. Similarly, the chosen production approach reinforces Lindemann’s exaggerated German singing style. The relatively quiet singing in low register combined with the proximity effect of the microphone supports crooning, which brings the vocals to the front and creates a menacing impression. Shouts or whispers panned hard left and right with little reverberation intensify this effect, for example in “Mein Teil”, where the singer is placed in the listeners’ personal or intimate space<sup>clxiii</sup>, disturbing them unexpectedly; a principle at the heart of the *Ästhetik der Überwältigung*. The fast reaction time of the compressor amplifies this intrusion into the personal space and, at the same time, emphasizes German-language features by bringing out mouth noises, breaths, hard consonants, and the stereotypical German guttural sounds. While this sound may already be perceived as threatening by a native German speaker, the effect is likely to be amplified for non-native speakers. A British review supports this assessment, “Till Lindemann’s authoritative Teutonic bark [...] remains both cold and dripping with men-

ace”<sup>clxiv</sup>, as does another American review, “If it’s loud enough, anything German seems menacing, a truth American bands have known for years”<sup>clxv</sup>. According to Landers, this association is deliberately evoked:

We are lucky that German is such a cool language for bad music. If I were English or Belgian, I would certainly sing in German. There’s nothing like German for bad, hard music. English has too much soul; it sounds much too nice. They can turn on the distortion or shout and scream... That leads to the problem that especially the English have with us. When the people there hear German lyrics, they stand up straight away and think that bombs are being thrown at them. We first had to explain that we don’t want to start a war; we just want to sing in German. The English still associate with the Germans the bombs that fell on London in the Second World War [...] Rammstein try to transform the negative image of the Germans in the world into a positive one. The Reichstag also had a negative image. Since Christo covered it, you think differently about it [...]. Similarly, we try to communicate that being German can also mean something good.<sup>clxvi</sup>

As Kahnke and Schiller have shown in terms of vocal style, lyrics, vocabulary, costumes, videos, live presentation, imagery, and album covers, Rammstein provocatively exaggerate their Germanness in order to clear negative associations that Germans and non-Germans have with this country.<sup>clxvii</sup> Improving the German image is one of their political motives, artistically implemented in their production aesthetics to stimulate reflection, similar to Laibach’s appropriation and critique of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>clxviii</sup> In the tradition of industrial music, Rammstein’s music does not give away how political aims should be realized. Only through interviews do their possible intentions become more explicit. In keeping with the motto not to forget but to forgive, they help the German audience to have a “healthier” relationship with their country’s past, which is more in line with the way the country is perceived abroad nowadays. Although Rammstein are primarily concerned with commercial success, it appears they address the international audience to improve the perception of Germany by parodying negative stereotypes such as “bad taste”<sup>clxix</sup>, rigidity, and lack of humor through exaggeration to the point of satire. Such parody is realized through *détournement*, juxtaposition, ambiguity, and extreme aesthetics.

A significant element of Rammstein’s exaggerated Germanness is the stiff sense of rhythm, which is perceived as controversial in Germany and exotic abroad, as described in foreign media: “hard-hitting marching rhythms” and “classically Teutonic”<sup>clxx</sup>. Kruspe explained why Rammstein deliberately strived for this aesthetic, “This was a project where we tried to do a ‘German’ style of music. By this I mean a really straightforward and direct sound, maybe even a little too ‘stiff’ rhythmically, without a lot of looseness”<sup>clxxi</sup>. Hellner rejects the prevailing view that this rhythmic precision is created in the production, claiming that the band simply plays very precisely.<sup>clxxii</sup> While this assertion is consistent with the mythology spread by West German metal producers<sup>clxxiii</sup>, the previous analysis of the drum rhythms suggests otherwise, a hyper-precise performance through editing. In this context, it is striking how the guitars and drums interact. Producer Bauerfeind regards the West German Gamma Ray as the least “Teutonic-sounding” Teutonic metal band because of their guitars rushing ahead of the drums for a more relaxed drum feel.<sup>clxxiv</sup> A common misconception of Rammstein’s rhythm as per Kruspe concerns how the instruments interact, “Actually, it’s not the drums that are behind... it’s me playing off the beat. The secret to our sound is him [drummer Christoph Schneider] being very on the beat. If he’s not, he’ll get edited to on the beat! But I try to lean back and stay just behind

that snare drum, which can give a different feel to certain riffs”<sup>clxxv</sup>. This slightly laid-back guitar feel brings the stiffness of the drums to the fore and contributes to Rammstein’s characteristic “German” rhythm.

Rammstein capitalize on their difference by deliberately exoticizing themselves.<sup>clxxvi</sup> They manage to convince an American audience of this unusual sound, “not a country normally associated with a taste for foreign ‘otherness’”<sup>clxxvii</sup>. Rammstein succeed in carefully balancing exoticism and conformity with quality criteria of the rock and metal genre. Hence their music is as palatable as possible to predominantly German, Central European, and Anglo-American audiences. Roy Shuker stresses that bands who wish to enter the North American and British pop music market must ensure that they are perceived as “local”. He advises against simulating global pop norms<sup>clxxviii</sup>, or else they would be regarded as inadequate copies, as happened to many of the West German metal bands.<sup>clxxix</sup> Three factors would contribute to a “local” impression: local associations through the band name and lyrical content, a noticeable vocal accent, and local idioms in the musical style. Rammstein are named after the US-American Air Base Ramstein near Frankfurt, their vocals are exaggeratedly “Germanic”, and some stereotypical German idioms like rigid rhythms are clearly emphasized. With their drum sound and the generally top-class production quality adhering to international standards, Rammstein are not perceived as too exotic. While Laibach were successful in parts of Europe<sup>clxxx</sup> by selling the “local”, Rammstein are targeting the Anglo-American world and Central Europe and thus need to fulfil respective quality criteria that in rock and metal commonly is a powerful production.<sup>clxxxi</sup>

Monroe observes how Laibach’s otherness has made them more attractive to a Western audience:

Paradoxically, the use of Slovene and German national symbolism in Laibach’s music was one of the key aspects of the group’s appeal in the West, offering the novelty of a distinctive national form within popular music. Laibach’s totalitarian discourse and visual signifiers also seemed to offer an “Eastern” authenticity, creating a “unique selling point” in the Western market.<sup>clxxxii</sup>

Similarly, Rammstein benefit to some extent from the marketing of Eastern ideologies and aesthetics adopted from Laibach and legitimized by their GDR background. But their main attraction, as Nye argues, lies in their selling of “Occidentalism within the Occident”.<sup>clxxxiii</sup> In doing so, however, Rammstein fail to include all audiences, as their sound and semiotic sphere are overwhelmingly male and white in the tradition of industrial music and the “Teutonic” aesthetic. By exploiting the “Teutonic” as a hyper-masculine and extreme form of “whiteness”, Rammstein’s lyrics, their sound on the record, their videos and live performances ignore women and non-binary gender, degrade them, or display extreme forms of perversion from a male perspective.<sup>clxxxiv</sup> Race is rarely addressed. Despite all their cosmopolitanism, their ignorance of the Global South and their pro-European and anti-US American taste could be read as anti-black. While Rammstein mix German, European, and North American sounds and performance characteristics in their production, they deliberately ignore black influences in popular music, such as off-beat accentuation<sup>clxxxv</sup> or a swinging groove. Rammstein’s success in the Anglo-American world and Central Europe is built on exaggerated Germanness, which virtually excludes black musical features. The conservative yet meticulous and admired production style makes their sound internationally outstanding in terms of technical standard, but it is

highly exclusive. It remains unclear whether their success in the Western world is based on the exclusion of non-white and non-male listeners or whether Rammstein are losing potential audiences by ignoring them in their programmatic restriction by the “Teutonic”.

## Conclusion

Rammstein’s success and controversy lie in their exaggerated portrayal of Germanness. One of Rammstein’s motivations for this stereotypical impression stems from their goal of helping Germans and the world in dealing with German identity in a more relaxed manner, not limiting Germany to its cruel past but acknowledging its rich culture.<sup>clxxxvi</sup> At the same time, Rammstein’s oeuvre is influenced by their biography, primarily through their loss of identity with the reunification of Germany. Spectacular live performances and videos help them achieve their goals, but Rammstein’s sound aesthetics have often been overlooked. While non-compliance with international standards in audio-visual art is comparatively easy to accomplish because of its immersion qualities, commercial success is much more challenging to achieve on a purely sonic medium. Simpson concludes that “Rammstein’s simultaneous foregrounding of their German national identity and the international appeal present a [...] challenge”<sup>clxxxvii</sup>. Rammstein’s sound is a carefully crafted mixture of various cultural elements from the Global North. There are unmistakable German signifiers such as language and vocal articulation, made even more effective through deliberate production techniques. The stiff German rhythm is another obvious signifier with its impression deliberately induced by emphasizing the manufactured rhythm while maintaining a natural acoustic sound. A drum sound closer to a drum computer, rhythmically mechanical and sonically one-dimensional, would have matched with the German electronic tradition of Kraftwerk and techno but might have been too extreme to appeal to a broader audience. Among Rammstein’s musical characteristics, only a few are exaggeratedly German; most sounds are culturally neutral within the dominant (white) pop discourse. As Robinson has argued about Rammstein’s political position, their work can be read in many ways in a metamodern sense.<sup>clxxxviii</sup> The band reasoned their refusal to elaborate on their art with making it open to interpretation. Ambiguity, after all, is what constitutes Rammstein’s appeal and ensures addressing various audiences. Following Everley, Rammstein are “simultaneously the *most* and *least* German band imaginable; a thoroughly alien concept in a world that rejects anything it doesn’t recognise”<sup>clxxxix</sup>. The balance between conformity and unique otherness in their sound sets Rammstein apart from more conventional rock and metal bands. They play with all too apparent German stereotypes but carefully weave them into an international sound of the highest quality, one that many envy. This exceptional production standard alone would probably have brought them chart success in the rock and metal world but what makes them a major player in the general popular music charts is this distinct exotic element. The fact that provocation sells is hardly new, but it requires excellent craftsmanship, as it is the case with Rammstein. The musicians are outstanding performers, the arrangements are rich in detail, and the production is of exceptional quality. Despite the clear German signifiers in their sound, Rammstein take particular care not to let the German sound dominate. Except for a few carefully selected exotic elements, they have an international, perhaps even American sound to which German, Central European, British, and North American listeners are used. Considering the difficult situation of the German recording industry in the 1990s and the economic

motives during the time of their formation in 1994, one can see a clear marketing strategy that worked and turned Rammstein into one of the most internationally successful German artists ever.

In their 25-year career, Rammstein seem to have achieved one of their three goals: improving the foreign perception of Germany after the Second World War through their music. In 1998, Kruspe dreamed of following in Kraftwerk's footsteps and transforming Rammstein into a role model for German popular music.<sup>cxv</sup> Their global success is proof of this achievement. A feature in the British *Kerrang!* magazine reports that they have "wipe[d] clean the slate for both themselves and their country's entire musical history".<sup>cxvi</sup> Although this statement is undoubtedly exaggerated, there is reason to believe that Rammstein have contributed to a better image of German popular music. For example, an article in the German newspaper *Die Welt* from 2019 entitled "It's a fortune for Germany that Rammstein exist" concludes that "Rammstein are not only the most influential but also the best ambassador Germany can imagine abroad".<sup>cxvii</sup> Their second goal, to personally come to terms with the effects of German unification, is making progress. As the song "Deutschland" on their latest album and recent interviews suggest, Rammstein slowly accept the world is changing. The music helped them to process their worries and hopes. Rammstein's third goal that Germans may find peace with their nation's past has not yet been fully achieved. Germany remains sensitive about its identity, as can be seen in the manner the ambiguity in Rammstein's aesthetic is often interpreted. What many people fail to understand is that the humoristic and provocative contrasts in Rammstein's concept are intended to stimulate reflection. For this reason, Rammstein combine ambivalent elements such as immersive sounds and catchy melodies with evil lyrics and fascist provocation, and contentious sounds with references to classical literature.<sup>cxviii</sup> Rammstein still being debated proves that this strategy works, but also that their ultimate goal has not yet been achieved.

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