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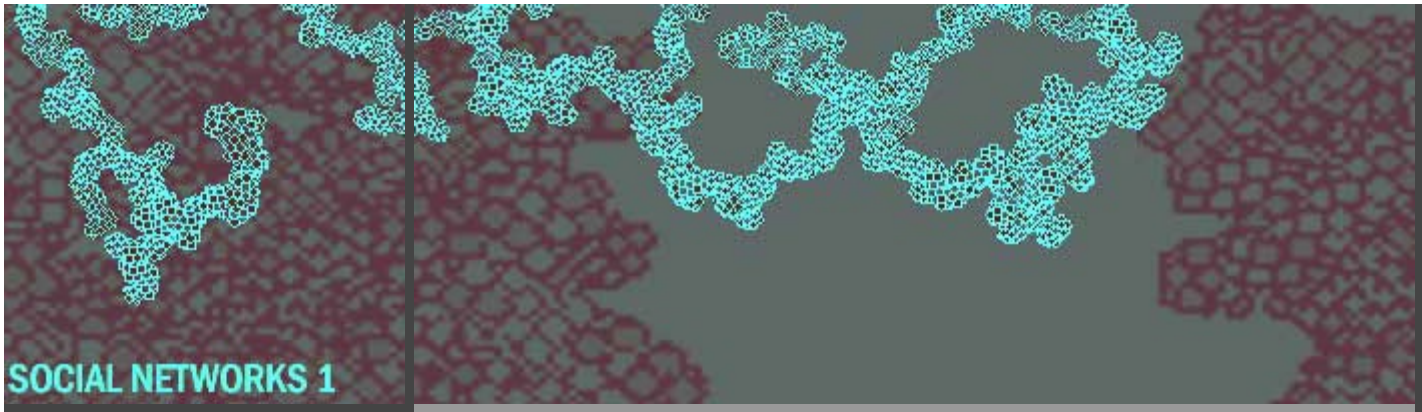

The Musicking Machine

Jody Berland on Jan 1 2000 **issue 15**

What do musicians with traditional training have to offer the new musical culture of the 21st century? It is not hard to believe that we are completely obsolete. To some musicians and music theorists, the complete digitization of musical production signals the "end of music". But nothing is the end of music, and as McLuhan showed us, "obsolescence" is a far more complex process than we ever imagined.

What do musicians with traditional training -- in my case, eleven years of piano lessons -- have to offer the new musical culture of the 21st century? It is not hard to believe that we are completely obsolete. A host of new Internet services offer on-line studio facilities that provide studio time, a range of digital instruments, and real or digital collaborators to people interested in recording music on their computers. To some musicians and music theorists, the complete digitization of musical production signals the "end of music". But nothing is the end of music, and as McLuhan showed us, "obsolescence" is a far more complex process than we ever imagined.

McLuhan was responsible for showing us that media exist in a kind of larger media ecology, and that, as with plants or animals, how each species exists and how one species makes use of another is inseparable from their place in their ecological system. But media technologies have their own laws of interaction. When a new medium emerges at the forefront of commercial and technical development, previous media become "obsolete." In McLuhan's language, that means that the new technology "turns its predecessor into an art form." Because the previous medium becomes the "content" of the new medium (drama as the "content" of film, film as the "content" of television, musical performance, or "musicking," as the "content" of digital sampling, etc), we may not be fully aware of the profound changes occuring with these technological shifts. With the rapidity of these changes, "Technologies begin to perform the function of art in making us aware of the psychic and social consequences of technology."

McLuhan was never one to underestimate the difficulties of understanding these shifts. To make sense of new media developments, Marshall McLuhan and his son, Eric, developed a tetrad of the "laws" of media. They argue that there are four verifiable statements that can be "scientifically" applied to every medium. They pose these as questions:

- What does it enhance or intensify?
- What does it render obsolete or displace?
- What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?
- What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?

For instance, television enhances multisensuous experience, displaces radio, film, and point-of-view perspective; retrieves the occult, and reproduces the "inner trip." The car enhances privacy, displaces the horse and buggy, retrieves the knight in shining armour, and in extreme form produces traffic jams and corporate piracy. Perhaps

services such as the Rocket Network (**http://www.rocketnetwork.com/index.html**) can be "read" in terms of these four laws?

What is enhanced? The technological mediation of music, the accessibility of musical "tools," the spatial reach of sound technologies, and interaction between digital and musical technologies.

What is obsolesced? Musicians, audiences, ears, musical skills, and instruments: everything that was once called "music." Also, the physical boundaries of the home, the studio, the concert hall, and even the CD.

What is retrieved? Creative collaboration for musicians who might have retreated to the isolation of their studios or lost their individuality in classical or commercial music. In some cases, musical dialogue in real time.

And what does it produce in extreme forms? We don't know the answer to that yet; anything we might say is pure speculation. Perhaps a soundtrack for every lived moment? Aural tyranny? Musical theft from afar? The end of record companies? Copyright wars between friends or across centuries? A bubbling over of data? A planetary music of the spheres? For now we will have to focus on the other questions.

1. NO COLLABORATORS

"Certain sound-generation techniques... are intrinsically efficient from a computational standpoint... Once one has analysed sounds one can modify the analysis data to create variations of them," writes Curtis Roads, editor of the journal Music Machine. Traditionally, music, "live" or otherwise, has been the creation of human performers But with the development of technology, "electronic media can replace human media -- performers."IRASM 2 (1989) 193-220: 193 Live performers are the first medium made obsolete by digital music synthesis. As theorist Jacques Ellul (1964) writes: "Technique analyses its objects so that it can re-constitute them." "This is never as clear," Frederickson observes, "as in the analysis and reconstitution of musicians' sounds." He concludes that "When the conventions of an artworld allow a type of social technology by which musicians can be abstracted from the production, machine technology can make its greatest inroads into musical performance."

The completely mechanical orchestra was part of the dreamscape of early modernists. Honneger claimed that "The future is with the completely mechanical orchestra...." and looked forward to the time when "modern scientific methods" would solve the "problems created by the growing demands of human interpreters." A composers' "retaliation" against "parasitic" performers?

With the new Music Machine, "composers" can choose whether to collaborate with live human performers, technically mediated performers, temporally mediated performers, or digital simulations of musical sounds. In the last case, the collaboration is not with others but with one's own temporally sequenced soundtracks. One doesn't really need collaborators -- with the available technology, one can reconstitute and simulate any sound. Musicians have already been made obsolete in recording sessions, since even the most individual or characteristic sounds can be sampled and reproduced by synthesizer. The producer has the sounds of her or his favourite musicians replicated on disk, and the MIDI function replaces the coordinating actions of the conductor. The technique is a complete reification of the idea of sound as individual "signature" -- once again, it is simulated as it is replaced. That damn Barthes again!

2. NO AUDIENCE

The practice of recording music in a studio, rather than in a performance context, is decades old. Interactive web-based collaboration is, in a sense, a logical spatial extension of a studio performance practice in which musicians play without an audience, often isolated in cell-like rooms separated by studio walls and connected by audio technology. In the studio the musician does not play to an audience but to a studio microphone. The sound is "adjusted" to fit with others not by a relationship between performer and audience but by a sound engineer.

Frederickson compares the studio musician to Pirandello's film actor, also working without a live audience, "who feels inexplicable emptiness; his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence..."

This produces new expectations in audiences; they expect to hear "a certain kind of dramatic, engineered sound available on recordings but unproducable live. So live musicians must imitate recordings which have created a new norm for what constitutes

live music.... Changing technology creates new aesthetic expectations which in turn generate new artworld conventions. Live music begins to imitate technologically mediated music. Yet technologically mediated music also imitates live music."

With music cruising the Internet, on the other hand, the audience can be anywhere, they can even become part of the Music Machine if they can figure out how to pay the entry price. Music is no longer something made by musicians. We don't know yet what comes after music, but we know it involves " audiences" in fundamentally different ways.

3. NO PERFORMANCES

Recordings also simulate live recordings. Live musicians are imitating recordings which are imitating live performances. "That which is 'live' can be analyzed, reconstituted, and then simulated through a judicious use of the dials." Thus the microphone becomes an extension of the ear, as McLuhan would put it, and the ear itself changes. Listeners accustomed to the sound of recordings have been listening (unawares) with an omnipresent ear, which is represented by the microphone, strategically placed among the musicians and soloists to create a diffuse aural space. A live concert can seem to them "but a pale reflection of the recording because the living ear cannot be omnipresent. Hence, a new medium not only shapes our sensory awareness, but that transformed awareness becomes that which observes." It's like watching a hockey game; on television, you can see every play several times from several angles, but when you go to the game, you have only your poor, distant perspective, alleviated of course by enlarged video screens. The social experience is no longer enough to make up for the lack of technical precision.

4. NO EARS

The living ear cannot be ominipresent. It is sound that surrounds the ear, not the reverse.

When musicians' sounds are sampled, they are rendered into digital information to be analysed visually. Playing, recording, mixing all become aesthetic processes guided by the eye fixed on the computer screen. Internet collaboration may encourage the restoration of the ear as the sensuous agent of the musical network.

5. NO INSTRUMENTS

With the widespread use of drum machines and other instrument simulations, players are no longer in demand. But their diskette collection might be, and they need to have one to be employed in many contemporary studio sessions.

The exception is the fetishized sound of famous artists, who can demonstrate ownership, ie copyright, through the recognizability -- the signature -- of their own performance style. This is the most contentious legal issue of new musical practices. Even this can be subsumed by the "network" of the digitalization/commodification process. The artist's 'aura' is transformed into a collection of electronic information on a diskette. "The musician loses his [sic] status as an interpreter becoming instead a sound source, and a dispensable one at that."

These new instruments promise a vast facilitation -- what Roads, above, called "efficiency" -- of the sounds made by conventional instruments. These instruments have themselves replaced earlier, older musical tools. The difference now is that instruments as we understand them are no longer needed. . "We may now face a revolution which sweeps away woods, pipes, membranes, strings, and with them, centuries of hard work. Sticking to acoustic traditions may become merely dated, stubborn sentimentality." Each aspect of performance -- the performer, the work, the audience -- is being rationalized, abstracted and replicated by digital means. This leads to an abstraction or reification of human relationships themselves. Music doesn't arise as a form of communication among musicians but rather as the result of a purposeful manipulation of digital sounds coordinated by a "MIDI" conductor. Perhaps, with the restoration of Internet collaboration, performers may be restored to the world of music. But will instruments?

The ability to transform the individual sound into a digital replication assumes the form of the "fetish" -- the transferral of missing power onto an object, coupled with a disavowal of the lack. The sound of the voice becomes a fetishized commodity, severed from the embodied process of singing. The "lack" in the Music Machine is the embodied process of making music -- a relationship between performers, their instruments, and their audiences, whose very humanness guarantees that it will slip away in the moment it is heard. Another way to put this is that musical embodiment is extended beyond the physical body and becomes a kind of abstract social embodiment -- of what?

6. NO SKILLS

With the "evolution" of sound technology, traditional performance standards are seen as a way of sustaining outmoded concepts of accomplishment. "Specifically, performers may, despite assuming an immediate causal role in the production of sound, lack the full responsibility for it we conventionally expect in performance." In this environment we come to respect technical innovation -- the elaboration of digital networking -- but not musical skill. "Depending on the modulator, any player at any level of skill can execute any work with equal control, no matter how difficult its original scoring."

This is a difficult prospect for the critics and performers participating in contemporary musical culture. Why should we celebrate something that encourages disdain for all our hard work? The synthesizer is not just another instrument; it transforms and unites all music-making activities, categories and tools into one physically manipulable system, promising to combine all known or at least all financially viable sounds in the world into one. When music is digitally "networked" in this way, anyone can produce any sound. "Therewith, categories like 'baritone,' 'pianist,' and 'guitarist' become superficial, literally surface fluctuations. Once this happens, artistically ancient and deep-flowing distinctions between vocal and instrumental music and their associated traditions crumble."

But do they? Or are they just nurtured in another section -- another strata-- of our society? In Ontario, the ultra-conservative government wishes to eliminate music education from the elementary schools. That points to an era when musical training as we have come to know it is a luxury item restricted to private schools and exceptionally precocious children culled from outside the terrain of conspicuous consumption. Presumably this will work to restore the status of musical training, and a person who can play a traditional musical instrument will come to resemble a person who can cast a bowl - lovely, quaint, anachronistic, and expensive.

In the meantime, we are encouraged to respect technological innovation more than musical skill. It is part of a larger powerful belief system in which all success and improvement in the world derived from further sophistication in data processing. "Shouldn't we rejoice," asks Godlovitch, " in the prospect of finally supplanting chronically flawed acoustic designs with their fully reliable, unimaginably versatile electronic successors?" How interesting to hear that echo of religious language, reminding us of the permanent imperfection of our own bodies. But traditional musical skill derives from the experienced inhabitation of the musical body; of knowing how one's body enters into the work, and adapting oneself accordingly. With digital music networks as with computer images, there is no relationship between the physical qualities of the work, and the physical activities of the artist. For many this is a long-awaited reversal of an elitist musical culture, parallel with the belief that networks are more easily accessible than guitars. You don't need to have taken piano lessons, you don't need to practice every day as though your art were a sophisticated form of manual labour, you don't need to expose any part of yourself to a present listening other, if listeners appear they are not sitting in judgement of you. You don't have to know how to use your hands, how to sing, how to count or vibrate an object with your body.

But this post-music will find another language; once the old music ceases to be its "content," there is no telling what could happen with this network of players that comprise its nascent community, its nascent subject, its nascent form. And meanwhile, hopefully you can dance to it.

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