INTRODUCTION

My Favorite Things: The Joy of the Gizmo

There is no art that does not bear some burden of physicality.
To deny it is to descend to irony.

—Mel Bochner [1]

There is no question that Art is about things and thinginess. Even when no physical object is present (at a "happening," for example), the thing is implicit in its absence—as in the old roué's quip that "a drink before and a cigarette after are the three best things in life."

Music, on the other hand, is about "!thing"—the "not-thing." It is physical, to be sure—the delicious sound-pressure levels of symphonies and death metal do not bypass the body on the way to the brain. The essence of music, however, lies in the ear of the beholder, on the other side of the tympanum from the club floor. When we extol the beauty of the varnish on a Stradivarius, or the Klee-like elegance of a modern score, or the cling of the spandex, we are artifying the tools of music production and doing so at the expense of their musical utility.

Whereas artists have traditionally made *objects,* composers and musicians have made sound and left instrument construction to a slightly lower-status artisan, the luthier. Starting in the 1960s, however, these job descriptions became a bit muddled. Composers such as David Behrman, Gordon Mumma and David Tudor began building their own electronic instruments. Tudor spoke of "composing inside electronics"—his practice of embedding the score in silicon precluded the composer's delegation of the job to an engineer.

Composer/luthiers flourished in the 1970s, as flocks of little boxes grazed across tabletops in alternative performance spaces. However, with the rise of the personal computer in the 1980s, software supplanted solder, and putty-colored office equipment replaced the colorful spaghetti of patch cords. Most electronic composers put their toys back in the chest and returned to thinking about sound.

By the flop of the millennial clock, however, "circuit bending"—the autodidactic repurposing of cheap electronic toys—had brought gizmos back to the stage and public awareness. The annual Bent Festival, currently in its fourth year, draws hundreds of participants to its concerts, installations, workshops and demonstrations [2]. Classes in "hardware hacking" sell out in cities from Beijing to Brussels. In electronic performance today, idiosyncratic circuits are circling the laptops like wolves.

Working musicians, of course, from baroque violinists to rock guitarists, have long fetishized the tools of their trade, the mere naming of which can provoke a vehement reaction—shout "Tourte bow," "LA-2A," "TR-808" or "JTM45" in a room full of musicians, and one will notice the eyes brighten, the breath shorten and the anecdotes pour forth (but only to a point: many a "secret weapon" is held close to the chest, and some people simply find their technophilia too embarrassing to talk about in public).

This issue of *Leonardo Music Journal* was intended as a confessional and 12-step program of sorts, an opportunity for sound artists to reveal their secrets in the company of sympathetic peers. We solicited papers and artist's statements on the role of purchased or homemade instruments, effect boxes, pieces of studio gear, "bent" toys, self-built circuits and so on from composers, performers, multimedia artists, producers and recording engineers.

We obviously hit a nerve. We received the greatest number of submissions I have seen in my 10 years as editor-in-chief and far too many to fit within the page limitations of our print issue. Therefore we have split the content between the printed journal and a special issue of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* [3]. The objects honored are as varied as hearing aids, weather stations, heat engines, Dictaphones, clip-leads, Y-cords, mobile phones, fuzz tones, bent toys, laptops, equalizers, synthesizers, electric guitars, tape delays, contact mikes, radios, mechanical gears, violin bows, mixing bowls, drums and woven circuits.

I invited Sarah Washington, a luminary on the vibrant London circuit-bending scene, to curate the accompanying audio CD, for which she has assembled an extraordinary range of music, originating in everything from an over-amplified computer printer to video feedback.

Every human product is a collaboration between initiating concept and available materials, and while music has long claimed the distinction of the "most abstract" of art forms, it is nonetheless firmly rooted in a world of bodies and bibelots. As the passionate, geeky and erudite contributions to this issue demonstrate, however, dependence on (and fondness for) the stuff of things is not a limitation, but an inspiration—the slippery slope between transcendence and materiality, where the sweetest-smelling shrubbery grows.

NICOLAS COLLINS
Editor-in-Chief

References

1. Mel Bochner, "Excerpts From Speculation (1967–1970)," *ArtForum* (May 1970). See <www.ubu.com/papers/bochner_speculation.html>.

2. See <www.bentfestival.org>.

3. The *LEA* special issue includes articles by J. Anthony Allen, J.R. Ferguson and Paul Bell, Jason Freeman, Simon Katan, Han-earl Park, Martin Parker, John R. Richards, Paul Stapleton and Mario van Horrick. See <www.leonardo.info/lmj/lmj17.html>.