

Why Live? Performance in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Schadenfreude-infused articles about the beleaguered music industry have abounded lately, most of them focusing on the death-by-a-thousand-downloads of the very object that launched the industry: the record. We read of record companies devoting an increasing share of their dwindling profits to propping up a doomed product, prosecuting consumers and developers and desperately working to delay the inevitable rather than working to develop a long-term strategy. Lost in the noise, so to speak, is the flip side of the record: performance. The last several years, in inverse proportion to the decline in CD sales, have witnessed a rise in the visibility and profitability of live performance. As the *New York Times* reports on the day I write this, “Before file sharing tipped over the music business, bands used to tour in support of a record. Now they tour to get the dough to make a record”—mostly without the support or imprint of a major label [1].

Over the years, and frequently in the pages of this journal, many claims have been made for the influence of technological innovation on the development of music: Wallace Clement Sabine maintained that the rise of polyphony in Europe was directly linked to advances in architectural engineering (the extended reverberation time of cathedral architecture suspended the sequential notes of a melody long enough that they were heard as chords) [2]; Dieter Hildebrandt argued, somewhat more convincingly, that the perfection of the piano-forte in the 19th Century (made possible in part by improvements in iron-casting technology) simultaneously fueled the rise of the professional concert virtuoso and introduced amateur music-making into the homes of the middle classes [3]; and, of course, much has been made of Adolf Sax’s disappointment at his instrument’s lack of acceptance by classical composers, in contrast to its influence on the emergence of a new musical form, jazz, decades later. However, the musical ramifications of such technological fellow travelers as these are trumped dramatically by Thomas Edison’s patent of the gramophone in 1878. Recording, we all know, has changed the way people listen to music, perform music and compose music.

It has also, ironically, made the act of creating music, live and in person, a signally “special” event. It seems as though the isolation of ear-buds and the ephemerality of digital files have actually served to highlight the social significance and sweaty substantiality of live performance. Admittedly, for the touring bands profiled in the *Times* article, much of the profit lies in “merch”: One musician was quoted saying of his audience, “They follow us from city to city, see the shows, get drunk and buy shirts. Thank God they can’t download those.” Warhol famously suggested that people actually go to movies to stand in line, and it is possible that people do not go to concerts to hear music, they go to buy T-shirts. But it is also possible that there is something about live performance—its unpredictability, its physical discomfort, its exclusivity (an unlimited number of people can download, but only a limited number can be in one place at one time, and no amount of post-fact googling can make up for that difference)—that makes it fundamentally different from any other way of hearing music. Technology used in live performance is technology devoted to an experience, not a sound track; unavailable for reshuffle or back-up or exchange or duplication. It is a risk-taker’s cultural consumption.

For this issue of *Leonardo Music Journal* we solicited writing on the significance—or irrelevance—of contemporary performance practice and its alternatives, from across the musical spectrum.

Several authors discuss the role of performance in their own work. Brett Ian Balogh's two-phase *Spurious Landscape* begins with the improvised interaction of electronics and piano, whose multiple recordings are then freely superimposed to create a second performed work. Jason Freeman discusses the role of computer vision and real-time notation systems in his multimedia work *Flock*. Natalie Bell "performs" her podcasts by distributing advertising in the subway. Jeffrey Morris contrasts live-ness and mediation in his work. Takuya Yamauchi and Toru Iwatake describe their interactive *Sound Jewellery*. Jack Stockholm's *Eavesdropping* mixes web-mediated networked performance with live social interaction in a public space.

Other contributors address the mechanics, philosophy or history of performance in various genres. Scott Simon draws analogies between digital sampling and recording and its antecedents in jazz improvisation. Michael Filimowicz discusses the ambiguous identity of technology in live performance. Erwin Roebroeks speculates on the role of a modern *Camera* in the development of more broadly appealing new music. In separate papers, Greg Corness and Pedro Peixoto Ferreira address the function of digital media in what Corness describes as the "engagement of the body in our musical experience," while John Richards discusses a similar role for "dirty electronics" in live performance. Matthew Lawyer hypothesizes on using time-compression technology to maximize onstage productivity, in refutation of economist William Baumol's theory of the limits on the efficiency of performance.

Some writers revisit recording in light of performance. Tim Hecker analyzes Glenn Gould's highly publicized abandonment of the stage for the recording studio. Joe Milutis redefines the "liveness" of recording by stressing acousmatic music's engagement with the transformation of real-world sounds.

Jon Rose outlines the broad sweep of Australian music history, emphasizing the peculiar interplay of inherently native Australian culture with imported European technology and forms. And David Rothenberg breaks through the species barrier in his "Whale Music" performances off the coast of Maui.

For the CD included in this issue, Click Nilson focused on very recent developments in live computer music, including examples of live coding performances, computer ensembles, "unplugged" laptop performances and interactive pieces for computers and acoustic instruments.

At the end of his recent book *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, Mark Katz quotes a retired classical recording engineer, John Pfeiffer, paraphrasing Kipling: "A recording is one thing, a concert is another, and never the twain shall meet" [4]. Clearly things have changed since Mr. Pfeiffer stepped back from his mixer—the twains have met and seem to be getting along quite well.

A few days before I sat down to write this introduction Michel Waisvisz died at the age of 59. For 27 years Michel was the director of STEIM, a Dutch foundation that has supported hundreds of musicians and artists from around the world who came to develop tools for live performance with technology. With instruments of his own invention, such as the infamous Kraakdoos (Cracklebox) and The Hands, Michel also secured a reputation as one of the great electronic virtuosi of our time. He will be greatly missed by many. In recognition of Michel's singular devotion to live performance this volume of *Leonardo Music Journal* is dedicated to his memory.

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References

1. David Carr, "Live Music Thrives as CDs Fade," *New York Times*, 23 June 2008, p. C1, 6.
2. Wallace Clement Sabine, "Origin of the Musical Scale," in *Collected Papers on Acoustics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922) p. 113.
3. Dieter Hilderbrandt, *Pianoforte: A Social History of the Piano* (New York: George Braziller, 1988).
4. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004) p. 189.