

A Turn in the Shrubbery— Music, Technology and Words

Between the invention of a tool and the articulation of its theory lies a wacky wilderness. The development of plastics, for example, generated within its own industry deep philosophical worries: Was it a substitute for natural materials? An improvement upon them? A new substance altogether? For years, manufacturers laboriously milled plastic into shape as if it were mahogany or granite, utterly missing the profound truth of its castability, as well as the general public's indifference to philosophy and instinctive pursuit of utility. The flowering of new musical and audio technologies in the last few decades has followed much the same path.

Hard on the heels of utopian speculation comes team-spirited boosterism. From the inventors themselves flow words glistening with the oily sheen of salesmanship. The Dr. Bronners of this world extol the universality of their product—among them are the early synthesizer designers who, along with nervous union musicians, believed their machines capable of “replacing the entire orchestra.” At the other extreme we have the Edisons, blindly convinced of their invention's one true application and oblivious to any consumer-driven adaptations: Edison was sure that the real market for the gramophone was the playback of “audio autographs” (famous speeches) and that musical recordings were a passing novelty.

Once out in the world, every invention succumbs to its popular uses—the gramophone plays Caruso rather than Woodrow Wilson, the Moog plays boops and beeps rather than Caruso. While early users of an invention, from the automobile to the Altair, often indulge in cultish enthusiasms that predispose the unconverted to disbelief, gradually these cults devolve into a broader culture. Instruction manuals evolve like scripture does, from a simple document of instruction—“connect to power source; press ‘on’ button”—into a multimedia mess of contradictory commentary, suggestions, prohibitions and gnostic addenda, within which the hopeful user chooses (or is led down) a path, trusting it to be the righteous one. One has only to listen to the fundamentally different ethos to which the electronic music studios of France and Germany have turned virtually identical 1950s technologies to hear this principle in action. Any day on the Internet one can view it happening in real time.

These competing documents, oral injunctions and artifacts are not without value. Indeed, by illuminating the serpentine path through which technology enters society, they reveal much about the curious interaction between the desire for things, the need for things and the use of things. But is this material sufficient for the artist searching not just for a how-to manual, but for a why-to manual—for a glimmer of meaning and content that might transcend the simple pushing of buttons and endless revision of code?

As we approach the end of the millennium, composers working with new technologies are flooded with information. We can thumb through it, download it, post it, toast it, email it, broadcast it, encrypt it and animate it. It can help us buy and operate our machines. But the attendant analysis of music—analysis that has, since the sixteenth century, been essential to the production of new musical forms—ran into a brick wall somewhere between Schoenberg and Lucier. There is today no body of theory that makes sense of the music of the last half of this century. This could be seen as an advantage, an occasion for unfettered diversity in musical creation and intuitive evaluation of the end product. But there comes a time in the life of most composers when they feel the urge to see “the big picture” in taxonomic terms.

What to do? One can try to force the emergence of a single unifying theory—an endeavor like encouraging a bulb to bloom out of season (and one with similar hopes of longevity). Or one can look at a large sample of musical activity and perform a crude statistical analysis, looking for trends, areas of interest, points in common. What is needed, of course, is something beyond either of these alternatives—a garden path bordered with massings, not just of information, but of thought: thought of the type that can lead to more thought, analysis, invention and even—upon those ever-rare occasions when the wind is blowing in the right direction—to whiffs of inspiration.

Leonardo Music Journal was established as a forum for artists working with new technology. For 6 years, it has provided an opportunity for composers to write directly about ideas of personal significance, without mediation. However, with the Kudzu-like growth of the Internet, where any artist any-

where with any interest can post or download manifesti for global delectation, the needs *LMJ* must meet have altered. As a composer, I have long felt the dearth of cogent and compelling writing in my field, and have also been sensitive to the silence of certain critical composers who do not themselves write. So, while maintaining the spirit of artist-initiated thought, beginning with its next issue, the journal will also include interviews and writing by critics and journalists, providing a venue for composers whose ideas are of importance but whose words are seldom heard. The editorial hand (albeit the hand of a composer-editor) will also be stronger in shaping each issue around a given theme, but we will aim to make the themes less materially specific than conceptually winsome. At the same time, we will be expanding our World Wide Web site to complement the print journal, provide more space for more artists and become a center for links serving both technical and aesthetic needs. Hopefully, by midnight on 31 December 1999, as we uncork bubbly and our computer clocks tiptoe into the unknown, we will know better what we have done, where we are going and why.

NICOLAS COLLINS

LEONARDO MUSIC JOURNAL/ ISAST ANNOUNCES

**Nicolas Collins named *Leonardo Music Journal*
Editor in Chief**

We are pleased to announce that Nicolas Collins has joined the *Leonardo Music Journal* editorial board and staff in the newly developed position of Editor in Chief. As Editor in Chief, Collins will assume primary responsibility for directing the content of *LMJ*, its CD series and its World Wide Web site.

Collins is a composer who has helped pioneer the use of quirky hybrids of high and low technology in live performance. Born in New York City, Collins was artistic director of Stichting STEIM in Amsterdam for several years and has long been active as a curator of concerts and sound installations. He currently resides in Berlin.