

Nicolas Collins Narrative Biography

I was born in New York City in 1954 to a Chilean mother and an American father. A childhood spent in the New York art world (my mother liked to park me at Tinguely exhibitions) and the Pop music of the 1960s, followed by studies with Alvin Lucier at Wesleyan University (BA 1976, MA in Music 1979), set me on my career path. I have been a composer and performer of electronic and instrumental music for over 30 years. For most of that time I have been motivated by three things: the visceral beauty of sound in space; the way that technology can act as an interface between musical and social structures; and a firm commitment to experimentalism's questioning of underlying assumptions about music.

My earliest work made extensive use of acoustic feedback, whose zen-like "infinite amplification of silence" reveals the music inherent in the acoustical qualities of rooms and objects. In *Pea Soup* (1974-76), for example, phase shifters automatically nudge the pitch of feedback to a different resonant frequency every time feedback starts to build, replacing the familiar shriek with unstable patterns of hollow tones -- a site-specific raga reflecting the acoustical personality of the room. Aided by David Behrman and David Tudor, I began building my own musical circuits, many of which -- inspired by the co-ordination scores of Christian Wolff -- were "ensemble instruments" that created music from the interaction of multiple players. The four musicians in *ANDS* (1978) play small keyboards that only register their actions if more than one player touches the same key at the same time. These Boolean instruments led directly to my working with early microcomputers, such as the Kim1: in *Little Spiders* (1981) (*Going Out With Slow Smoke*, Lovely Music LP, 1982), for example, multi-player interaction determines which of several paths a program takes in any given performance.

In New York in the 1980s I worked with some extremely talented players, producing pieces that attempted to merge improvisational forms with electronic structures. I performed, recorded, and toured the U.S., Europe and Japan as a solo artist, as well as in collaboration with groups from Tudor's "Composers Inside Electronics" to John Zorn's *Cobra* collective.

At the same time, I found myself increasingly drawn to the immediacy and power of burgeoning pop forms, from No Wave to Hip Hop, which prompted me build musical tools for a more visceral approach to sound and to audiences. These included "backwards" electronically resonated guitars, which combine shimmering filtering effects with the technique and theatre of the electric guitar; one such work, *Killed In A Bar When He Was Only Three* (1982) (*Going Out With Slow Smoke*), when performed at CBGBs prompted drunken shouts of "get off the stage!" *Devil's Music* (1985) (Trace Elements LP, 1985) used cheap samplers to grab, layer and "DJ" fragments of live radio broadcasts. My "trombone-propelled electronics" was a live sampling and signal processing system controlled from, and playing back through, a trombone; this versatile tool for combining electronic and acoustic sound formed the core of my 1988 Trace Elements CD, *100 Of The World's Most Beautiful Melodies*, which featured 42 short improvised duets with fifteen musicians, including George Lewis, Shelley Hirsch, Tom Cora and Christian Marclay. Finally, I hacked CD players to allow scratching and looping recordings, and wrote a series of pieces, such as *Broken Light* (1991), which combined skipping CDs with acoustic players (*It Was A Dark And Stormy Night*, Trace Elements CD, 1992).

It was clear to me, through all this work, that electronics still produced what they had promised all along: not just new sounds but new structures. In larger form pieces toward the end of the 1980s I adapted structures "natural" to electronics -- loops, skips, cracked repetitions -- to non-electronic situations, re-orchestrating boops and beeps for strums and tweets, so to speak. The first such composition, *It Was A Dark And Stormy Night* (1990,) takes the sampling and DSP-derived structure of *Tobabo Fonio* (1986), a work created for trombone-propelled electronics, and maps it onto a vocal-driven ensemble (both on *It Was A Dark And Stormy Night*).

Between undergraduate and graduate school I had spent a year traveling throughout Europe as a Thomas J. Watson Fellow, researching experimental music and art, presenting my own work, and initiating artistic and social relationships that last to this day. In 1992 I relocated from New York to Amsterdam to become Artistic Director of the music research foundation Stichting STEIM, and in 1996 I moved to Berlin as a guest of the DAAD's Künstlerprogram. While in Europe I worked intensively with ensembles including Zeitkratzer, Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin and the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, on interactive music for players with electronics, as well as on purely acoustic pieces: the chamber musicians in my "séance opera", *Truth In Clouds* (1999), perform real-time variations on fragments of old musical scores according to instructions on small computer displays. Inspired by reading to my young children, as well as the preciousness one's native tongue takes on in a foreign country, the majority of my music in the 1990s centered around spoken texts, translated into other sounds via a range of electronic and acoustic techniques: backwards guitars, inflection-tracking drum machines, computer signal processing, etc. (see *Sound Without Picture*, Periplum CD, 1999).

I moved back to the USA in 1999 to join the Department of Sound at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Encouraged by my students, I returned to my roots in intuitive circuitry, eventually publishing *Handmade Electronic Music – The Art of Hardware Hacking* (Routledge, 2006; expanded second edition published in 2009), which combines an accessible guide to building personal electronic instruments with an historical overview of significant contributors to the field. I've composed a few electronic ensemble pieces drawn from my experiences conducting hacking workshops (*Bowerbird*, 2004; *Salvage*, 2008).

Most recently I have become interested in how digital file-sharing protocols can alter the way music is created. I have adapted, extended and distributed earlier, circuit-based works as software: thus *Devil's Music 2.0* (2003) was given a four-hour performance by a dozen laptop artists at the 2003 *MaerzMusik* festival in Berlin. This has led me to begin designing a website where musicians can upload recordings of performances in exchange for downloading the programs used to make them – piggybacking a new model for distributing scores and archiving performances on the technologies that have recently revolutionized pop music consumption.

Throughout my career I have had a keen interest in the musical community at large, serving on the boards of not-for-profits (Roulette and Harvestworks), working at foundations (STEIM, Thomas J. Watson), and participating in juries (Gaudeamus Music Week). Concerned about the dearth of documentation left by the largely oral culture of experimental music, I have written for numerous journals and books, including *The Contemporary Music Review*, *MusikTexte*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*. Since 1997 I have been Editor-In-Chief of the *Leonardo Music Journal*, addressing critical issues in experimental music around the globe. I was Sound Curator for The Clocktower and PS1 (1985-87), and organized a major festival for The Kitchen later released on CD by Nonesuch Records (*Imaginary Landscapes*, 1990). During the 1990s I took advantage of European cultural largesse to produce dozens of concerts, culminating in *Pfeifen im Walde*, a two-week festival within the Luzern Festwochen on the theme of whistling featuring 190 performers from 19 countries.

I've presented over 500 concerts and installations worldwide, from the Anticlub (Los Angeles) to ZKM (Karlsruhe); in Beijing, Bogotá, Brussels, Budapest and Boston. My music is available on three-dozen recordings, on Nonesuch, Lovely Music, Wergo, Tzadik, Mille Plateaux, and other labels. Grants and commissions include New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Illinois Arts Council, DAAD, British Arts Council, VPRO Radio (Netherlands), Radio Bremen, and Berlin Biennale. Most of my recordings and writings can be found on www.nicolascollins.com.