

About Me
Nicolas Collins
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I have been a composer and performer of electronic and instrumental music for over 40 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.

I studied with Alvin Lucier at Wesleyan University in the 1970s. 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), 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. I began building my own electronic 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. By the end of the decade these circuits led directly to my working with pre-Apple microcomputers like the Kim-1: in *Little Spiders* (1981) 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, writing 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 to build musical tools for a more visceral approach to sound. 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), when performed at CBGBs prompted drunken shouts of "get off the stage!" *Devil's Music* (1985) used arrays of 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 was my entrée into the world of improvised music, as heard on *100 Of The World's Most Beautiful Melodies* (1988), 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 compositions that combined skipping CDs with acoustic musicians, such as *Broken Light* (1991) for string quartet.

It was clear to me, through all this work, that electronics still produced not just new sounds but new structures as well. In larger form pieces toward the end of the 1980s I adapted structures natural to electronics -- loops, skips, cracked repetitions -- to non-electronic settings, 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.

In 1992 I relocated to Amsterdam to become Visiting Artistic Director of the music research foundation STEIM, and in 1996 moved to Berlin as a guest of the DAAD's Künstlerprogramm. While in Europe I worked intensively with several ensembles -- including Zeitkratzer,

Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin and the Netherlands Wind Ensemble -- on interactive music for players with electronics. Inspired by reading to my young children, as well as the preciousness one's native tongue takes on in a foreign country, much of my music in the 1990s centered around spoken texts, translated into other sounds via a range of electronic and acoustic techniques (*Sound Without Picture*, 1999).

I returned 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 rediscovered to my roots in intuitive circuitry, eventually publishing *Handmade Electronic Music – The Art of Hardware Hacking* (Routledge, 2006, revised 2nd edition 2009), which combines an accessible guide to building personal electronic instruments with an overview of contributors to the field. I've composed several electronic ensemble pieces drawn from my experiences conducting numerous hacking workshops, which opened my ears to the acoustic splendor of controlled chaos (*Salvage*, 2008).

Simultaneous with my renewed engagement with low-level circuitry has come a growing interest in how digital file-sharing protocols can alter the way music is created and circulated. I have adapted, extended and distributed earlier, circuit-based works as software: several laptop ensembles have downloaded and performed *Devil's Music 2.0* (2003) (including at the 2003 *MaerzMusik* festival in Berlin), and cloning in code the rare Countryman phase shifters has put *Pea Soup* (1974-2004) back in repertoire, leading to dozens of concerts worldwide. Performance software for many of my more recent compositions can be downloaded from my website as well, including several which use video projection to display scores generated by the computer in real time. And several of my recent "records" exist solely as web-based streaming audio apps.

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, and participating in various juries. 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 on the theme of whistling featuring 190 performers from 19 countries.

I've presented over 1000 concerts and installations worldwide, from the Anticlub (Los Angeles) to ZKM (Karlsruhe); in Beijing, Bogota, Boston, Brussels and Budapest. My music is available on dozens of recordings, on Nonesuch, Lovely Music, Wergo, Tzadik, Mille Plateaux, Trace Elements 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, Radio Bremen and the Berlin Biennale.

Most of my recordings and writings can be found on www.nicolascollins.com.