

Performing Live Electronic Music

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Preface

Germán Toro Pérez

Performing Live Electronic Music: Technical and Aesthetical Challenges in the Digital Age is the title of a research project realised at the Institute for Computer Music and Sound Technology between 2018 and 2023 and made possible by a generous grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation.¹ Intended as practice-based research, the project focused on the challenges met by performers today in view of increasing aesthetical diversity, rapidly evolving technology, and transforming reception cultures. Twenty-eight pieces were studied, performed and discussed in six workshops and a concluding symposium. The selection was based on a systematic view of the repertoire according to six compositional approaches to be understood as sets of interrelated and overlapping features:

1. Sound, space and interaction
2. Composing the instrument
3. Formalised and conceptual approaches
4. Collaboration, oral tradition, open form, improvisation
5. Sampling and pop aesthetics
6. Multimodality, visuality, body and gesture

The research was structured along modules entailing source study, exchange with composers and experts (scholars, performers, musicians involved in the creation and/or the performance of the pieces, publishers and archives), and our own performative work. Each module would end with a workshop giving composers, experts and the research team the opportunity to share insights, discuss the pieces in open rehearsals and experience them in concert. Thus far, the output consists of articles on individual pieces published in our database,² exemplary recordings,³ lectures and performances.

The majority of the texts gathered in this book were first presented and discussed at a concluding symposium realised in September of 2022.⁴ These texts, reworked and expanded, in some cases refer to insights and materials collected during the project. Nevertheless, the aim of the symposium and subsequent pub-

1 *Performing Live Electronic Music: Technical and Aesthetical Challenges in the Digital Age*. <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/182693>.

2 *Performance Practice of Electroacoustic Music – The Database*. <http://ppeam.zhdk.ch/>

3 Les Espaces Electroacoustiques III, col legno WWE 40005 (SACD). <https://www.col-legno.com/en/shop/40005-les-espaces-electroacoustiques-iii>.

4 Zurich University of the Arts, 22–29 September 2022, <https://www.zhdk.ch/en/event/48138>.

lication was to discuss live electronic music in a broader, interdisciplinary context, adopting a perspective that, in contrast to the previous work-specific research, would allow to interweave single threads of inquiry from philosophy, musicology, music theory, composition and performance practice. Ultimately, the project in general, and this publication in particular intend to update our understanding of live electronic music as a practice able to highlight in an exemplary manner the transforming interrelations between arts, sciences, technology, and social practices. Two years later, in a time of growing global crisis—climate, democracy, migration—the reflection on live electronic music reveals the potential of artistic practice to perform the reconfiguration of relationships between us and our environment.

Accordingly, the texts presented in the first section of this book go beyond the specific forms of live electronic music represented by the selected pieces. Dieter Mersch highlights ‘experimental electroacoustic live productions’—in opposition to a merely imitating ‘AI-compositing’—from a philosophical-ethical standpoint as ‘live electronic events’, where composition and improvisation ‘fold into each other’, constituting the ‘pragmatics of aesthetical research’. In the next chapter I discuss the ‘epistemic potential’ of live electronic music as a constitutive feature of sounding arts involving technology in the era of artistic research. Identifying ‘epistemic markers’ in instrumental devices and settings, the text discusses their impact on the ‘way we understand, create and perceive musical form’. In a ‘practitioner-focused discussion’, Simon Emmerson advances his reflection on human-machine relationships in live electronic ‘musicking’. Elaborating on models from musicology and philosophy, he shifts the discussion from liveness to meaning. Agostino Di Scipio greatly expands the concept of ecology and makes a strong case for a post-humanist understanding of live electronic performance as a practice that ‘makes tangible—or better audible—what it means in our times to live as humans dwelling in utterly technologised ecologies’. ‘Human-object relations’ are also at the core of Rama Gottfried’s essay, contemplating a composition and performance practice in which instrument design, inspired by human-computer interaction, theatre, puppetry and improvisation, constitutes a post-instrumental approach to live electronics.

The last chapter serves as a bridge to the next section, in which the authors approach topics of live electronic composition and performance practice mentioned above, such as instrument ‘composition’, notation, reconstruction and collaboration. All four chapters refer to pieces studied in the project. Based on reflections on the nature of instruments in live electronic practice, Miriam Akkermann refines models describing the relationships between all agents involved in performance systems in order to discuss the instrumental settings of *Flute Control* by Thomas Kessler and *Dead Wire* by Iris ter Shiphorst. The transformation of the status and role of notation, challenged by new musical practices such as live electronics, is the focus of Kilian Schwoon’s contribution. The black box metaphor serves as starting

point for a discussion of the fragility of notation systems (and tools) in view of the reperformability of pieces. A critical take on limitations in reconstructing performance systems for the purpose of reperformances by Lucas Bennett and myself follows in the next chapter, discussing, among other pieces, *KOMA* by Gerhard. E. Winkler—a fascinating borderline case studied in the project. Finally, Laura Zattra's contribution offers a comprehensive study on creativity and collaboration based on interviews with composers and musicians involved in the creation of *Professor Bad Trip* by Fausto Romitelli, *Outer Space* by Clara Iannotta and *Regnum animale* by Andrea Valle and Mauro Lanza, advancing the fields and methods of philological research in electroacoustic music.

The third and last section is dedicated to the performers' view of their own practice. Alvisé Vidolin, one of the main contemporary witnesses in the field, recounts the transformation that occurred in the practice of electroacoustic performers ('sound directors') from its beginnings to our days. This retrospective view is complemented by Lydia Jeschke's reflections on the practice as it developed at the SWR Experimentalstudio, a prominent study object with respect to the role of institutions in the development of performance traditions. In contrast—albeit also addressing collaborative creative approaches—Thomas Moore describes and reflects on post-instrumental, performative and curatorial practices of new ensembles of 'digital natives' specialised in a highly technical, multi-modal repertoire as exemplified by the Belgian Nadar Ensemble. Additionally, Joan Oliver, one of the performers involved in the project, presents a comparative analysis of the performer's attitudes required in Horacio Vaggione's *Shifting Mirrors* and Marco Stroppa's ... *of Silence*. The section concludes with the transcription of a panel discussion with Martina Schucan, Matthias Ziegler, Joan Oliver and myself, extending the topic to other case studies.

I would like to take the opportunity to express my deep gratitude to all persons involved in realising the present publication: first of all the co-editors, Lucas Bennett, who has been my main collaborator and support in our research on performance practice of electroacoustic music at ICST since 2012, and Jörn Peter Hiekel, who's advice and commitment have been fundamental for the conception of the symposium and the present publication, and who accompanied the four-year research as our main project partner; Alvisé Vidolin and Kilian Schwoon, who have supported our research as advisers for more than a decade, adding to it great performances, lectures and contributions to our SACD releases. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the project team at ICST, among them former students that are now colleagues as well as long-time companions at ZHdK, for their professionalism and artistic commitment: Leandro Gianini, Carlos Hidalgo, Peter Färber, Dominikas Girčius, Mario Bruderhofer, Milena Winter and Florian Bogner.

Zurich, 23 June 2024