Look around and get engaged

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The term 'computer music', for those of us who lived through the beginnings, became meaningful during the pioneering period from the late 1950s through the 1970s. It was a positive term. It identified a specific genre of music, a major effort in musical experiment, research and exploration, a wealth of new sound-generating techniques, and a large palette of new sounds. Jean-Claude Risset, in *Inharmonique*, for example, used additive synthesis to extend principles of tonality into the microworld of spectral progression. John Chowning, in *Stria*, used the Golden Mean to define FM frequency ratios. For many of us, these were interesting ideas and beautiful sounds.

For the public, however, 'computer music' was not entirely positive. Computers were not well understood and technology in general was considered to be more the realm of mathematicians and scientists than musicians. The sounds of computer music were considered abstract and 'other worldly' since they contained none of the phrases, danceable rhythms or melodic contours that might have suggested familiar and friendly human performance. The perception of 'other worldliness' resulted not only from the character of the sounds but also in large part from the absence of a sound source in the concert hall other than a tape playback system. Of course, there were practical reasons for this. For one thing, early computers could not generate sound in real time. For another, computers were too large to be carried to concert halls. But even understanding the practicality issues, sitting in a concert hall and hearing strange sounds while looking at a stage without performers was not viewed by the general public as among the most agreeable of musical experiences. Early computer music, in short, did not develop in response to a market need or public approval. Its early development could not have happened without institutional support.

Voltage-controlled synthesizers, on the other hand, invented in the 1960s, were immediately played as musical instruments and immediately accepted and supported by a large and quickly growing public. The public success of synthesizers encouraged investment and interest in electronic music, and the technical lessons learned from the research results of computer music were applied to digital synthesizers throughout the 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, the world of commercial electronic music was a fabric made up of a large group of small companies, none of which by itself could justify the amount of capital it needed to grow the market. The solution to the problem, as perceived by Ikutaro Kakehashi, president of Roland, was a communication standard that would allow products from different companies to communicate with each other, thereby creating the possibility of a larger and more coherent market that could attract larger investment. MIDI, as the communication standard came to be called, created a marketplace aimed at the empowerment of individual creativity. It was the first major step in the democratisation of electronic music.

The success of MIDI was timely because institutional support began to diminish through the 1980s and 1990s, not only for research in electronic music but for arts in general. As government funding decreased, arts organisations had to depend increasingly on individual donors and earned income, and arts programming had to become more attractive to the public. The music world, including the world of electronic music, became a marketplace in which the success of any particular organisation was measured by the size of its public.

From an elitist perspective, the democratisation of music means a lowering of technical standards. But, in fact, the reverse is more true. As digital audio equipment and software has become more available to everyone, standards have become higher. There are more books on using computers to make music, more seminars, more education, more user groups, and in general, there is more communication, knowledge and skill available today than ever before. Computer companies, notably Apple, have promoted the musical use of computers, published music software, and explained to users how it all works. In this marketplace, computer music is not protected from the public by institutional support, it is supported by the public with the result in higher skill levels, more widespread education and community, and a generally higher level of professionalism than has ever before occurred.

But, one might ask, does that mean that there is also a higher level of artistic sensibility? Appreciation of

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originality? Refinement? Subtlety? Probably not. But a high level of artistic sensibility and an appreciation of originality, refinement and subtlety are rare in any field.

And is the electronic music marketplace open to innovation? Yes, certainly. Any sound is permissible, any performance gesture allowed, any performance space is usable, any adjunct medium such as video can be used in conjunction with electronic music, and artistic scandal is hard to imagine. In fact, traditional lines between the non-commercial avant-garde and commercial experimentation often become fuzzy as larger numbers of avant-garde composers and performers increasingly appeal to larger publics.

What does all this mean to us as researchers and composers of non-commercial music? For one thing, it means that we should not blame any perceived lack of success for any music any of us may have composed on a lack of appreciation for the medium of computer music. For another, it means that we should not feel we need to defend our fortress of traditional computer music and cloister ourselves within it. Relative to the pioneering period of traditional computer music, which has always been under-appreciated by the public, our task is education. But at this point, in many styles, and with a great diversity of artistic activity and goals, the viability of today's computer music is assured.

So where do we come in? Well, people may have shoes, but that doesn't mean that they know where to go. As early explorers of a new terrain, and as composers perhaps more concerned with ideas than with commercial success, our role is to show the new computer-music public, by example, research and education, where they can go in designing sounds, in composing, in creating instruments. It is far healthier for us to engage a new and large public of practitioners, already open to ideas and experimentation and receptive to new sounds, than to view ourselves as the marginalised defenders of concert halls with empty stages. We need to compose wonderful music with astonishing sounds, formulate new understandings, create new instruments, and find appealing ways to present our music, perhaps as sound-art installations in non-proscenium galleries, or in performances, or via the Internet. And we need to rightfully promote and project musical creativity with computers as among the most rewarding pursuits in the world.

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