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Sound waves of the future

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The difference between real music and what's on the radio today is all about seeing it performed live. On one side, you've got talented people with instruments, playing—actually *playing*—songs in real time and uncovering subtle nuances with each note. On the other side, you've got some guy behind boxes of wires and knobs who just pushes a button.

That's the most simplistic prejudice against the value of electronic music, at least when it comes to what's popular now. But what does it say about the state of music today when the new director of LSU's School of Music specializes in computer music? When his current research areas include virtual music instruments and he's part of an orchestra that doesn't play real instruments at all, but rather, music created on laptops?

This is 2012, and for every musical instrument and possible sound in the world, there's likely an app for that.

Stephen David Beck took charge of the School of Music this June. He holds a joint appointment at LSU's Center for Computation & Technology, and was the director of that office's AVATAR Initiative (short for Arts, Visualization, Advanced Technologies and Research) until this year. In other words, he stands on the virtual bridge between music and technology.

And putting him at the helm of the School of Music seems to signify the university's interest in exploring the possibilities of electronic music and digital music (often referred to as EM/DM) outside the novelty of pops and beeps.

"There's a real interest here in being at the forefront of what's next in music making," Beck says. "We are a traditional school of music, but we do have a significant number of people here who are very interested in creating new music as our field evolves over time. The fact that I'm in this position, it gives our school a little bit more authority to say this is a direction worth investigating."

The Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana, of which Beck is a founding member, has performed a number of times around Baton Rouge in the past three years. It was also a key component of the Symposium on Laptop Ensembles and Orchestras held back in April at LSU. The event, the first of its kind, was meant to "lay the groundwork for best practices," Beck says, for this emerging performance style.

To someone seeing a laptop orchestra performance for the first time, it can be either exciting or as visually stimulating as watching your friends texting on their iPhones. It's a problem Beck recognizes.

"[The audience is] not sure if the performers are actually doing something up there to make the sounds they are hearing or just checking their email," he says. "We decided we were going to approach laptop music making in a way that would counter the stereotype."

Nick Hwang, a Ph.D. student in the School of Music and member of the LOLs who also taught Intro to Computer Music for three years, says the ensemble has included different types of controllers—joysticks, iPads and Wii remotes—to add some visual stimulation and physicality to the performances. They've also brought in traditional instruments for accompaniment.

"Are we pandering to the audience? That is definitely something I've thought about," Hwang says.

Attracting that audience is important when you consider whether EM/DM are yet taken seriously as academic study. LSU's School of Music has a Ph.D. program in experimental music and digital media, and just this semester added an undergraduate concentration.

Yet, when LSU's Digital Media Festival announced its competition categories for this past spring's event, art, photography, animation and film were on the list, but not digital music. Hwang expressed frustration to organizers, who told him they didn't have enough submissions to warrant a separate category and encouraged him to submit in the general "Gumbo" category. The festival does plan to include a digital music category next year.

Similarly, Hwang, who is applying for a Fulbright scholarship to study in Taiwan, discovered the application didn't accommodate for digital music compositions. They wanted to see music sheets and notations, but not all of his digital material has notations, even those performed on stage.

Hwang also remarked about the broad range of students who took his Intro to Computer Music class, "Some students that come in, they're interested in making beats, which is fine. But there's also the more traditional side of electronic music that's a little closer to traditional art and music than Skrillex."

It's clear these modern composers still have their work cut out for them to build their audiences, but it isn't stopping them from innovating.

Jesse Allison, a School of Music professor who also works with the AVATAR Initiative, says the program, in its third year, provides a middle ground for artists interested in technology and computer scientists interested in applying their expertise to art and music. Many of the students in that program go on to work at digital media companies like PreSonus (read more about that local company on the next page).

Allison helped organize a Mobile Music Workshop in October where teams—including students and developers—created an instrument on a mobile device, composed music and then performed the composition a week later.

Asked about any conflict between EM/DM composers and more traditional musicians in the school, Allison says, "Sometimes we step over the bounds, but that's pretty similar to the way normal composers step over the bounds. A lot of the antagonism when it comes to electronic music is because we often come at it as 'This is the new thing; this is where music is going and that's it.' But we need to figure out how traditional music and electronic music can combine to make something new."

As Beck says, EM/DM is not meant to replace musicians, but to expand their capabilities.

And as technology evolves at lightning speed, Beck is already thinking of how the Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana may have to revisit its own name. Their next performance might be as the iPad Orchestra of Louisiana.

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