Title: How to conduct a laptop orchestra: Issues of coordination in computer music

Abstract: Computer music is a profoundly individual exercise. Its history is one of dedicated individuals spending months laboring in studios to produce a few minutes of sound. The recent proliferation of portable computers or laptops has brought computer music out of the studio and onto the stage. Laptop music performed live, however, is on the whole still an individual activity, rarely engaging more than two or three musicians. Joining together any more musicians than this encounters serious organizational, technological, and compositional challenges.

This paper presents the early results of an in-depth ethnographic study of the Princeton Laptop Orchestra, a highly successful and nationally recognized ensemble of computer musicians. The main focus of the paper is how the orchestra coordinates and structures making music together, using its compositions as the unit of analysis. Traditionally, music making is coordinated through a combination of informal norms like turn-taking rules in Jazz music and formalized structures like the role of the conductor in the symphony orchestra. Taking a cue from Lawrence Lessig’s discussion of computer code as law, I demonstrate how the main instrument of the ensemble, the laptop, helps coordinate music making as well. I find that the addition of the laptop to the repertoire of standard musical governance mechanisms detailed above often leads to serious conflict over which tasks are best assigned to computers versus humans. Through a series of observations of rehearsals and interviews with key members, I present illustrative examples of this conflict related to time-keeping and group discipline.

Presentation requirements: Projector for PowerPoint slides and possibly speakers if you want a sampling of the music.