The STEIM Studio Report

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Abstract

In a mix of short talks and demonstrations, members of STEIM will provide a picture of their most recent work in instrument and software design for composition, a discussion of the recent changes in our structure and of a bit of computer music dissent.

STEIM is undergoing major reorganization in response to what we perceive as the changing relation of music and technology. The distance between the worlds of music made in the studio and music performed live on the stage is paradoxical, both increasing and decreasing at the same time. The increase is relative to aesthetic norms which dating from times when the mere use of electronic technology made you a part of the avant garde. Being "modern" however is no longer enough, computer music is no longer interesting just because it is new. The migration of digital techniques out of the studio into the greater world of music is the cause of a great deal of nostalgia for a rapidly evaporating distinction, while at the same time, innovations in the tapeless studio are provoking a revival of venerable tape techniques. Most interesting of all, techniques once part of the definition of tape music are now feasible in performance.

All the furor about tape vs live seems not to be over real aesthetic issues but simply reaction to the often unloved changes in music over time. The personality of one generation is taken as often as canon as it is a tiresome habit by the next. It is certainly a fact that styles and modes of presentation once dictated by practical necessity are now a matter of choice. This apprehension over the evolution of styles is confounded with more Philistine quarrels over the greater "seriousness" of one genera versus another (when the real question is whether computer music is even a genera at all?) At STEIM we see musicians of all varieties and political persuasions drawn only by the fitness of digital electronics to the realization of their artistic goals. What ever the meaning of style, we should not allow our paraphernalia to determine our aesthetics.

Reorganization

The STEIM board of directors has reformed itself to include more members with personal involvement in the arts and to reflect a more outward and international point of view. New members include Franz de Ruiter director of the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, Jean-Bastie Barrier of IRCAM, Ted Machover of MIT, Simon Emerson of City University of London and Dirk Groenveld author and theater director.

STEIM has adopted the new position of artistic co-director. Each co-director, appointed for two or so year terms, will be responsible for projects, concerts and general administrative affairs. The first co-director will be New York composer Nick Collins. Collins has been
involved in electronic music since first studying music with Alvin Lucier at Wesleyan University. His interest in novel instruments, musical automation, and improvised electronic music has already lead to several collaborations at STEIM. He will be bringing to the studio experience both as a performing artist and as curator of a number of exhibitions and concert series most notably for the Kitchen in New York.

Joel Ryan taking on the position of scientific director a position responsible both for the research and pedagogical activities of the studio. STEIM is developing music research projects with several European studios and commercial partners.

Concerts and Festivals
As well as hosting its annual in-house concert series in the Spring to share the work of resident artists with community, STEIM was co-sponsor of the RUMORI concert series at the Frascati Theater in Amsterdam in the Fall of '91. Doing our part to dispel the idea of a "computer music" genre, mixed electric and acoustic pieces of a wide range of styles were presented alongside performances of modern classics by traditional chamber players, pieces by jazz influenced groups such as the Maarten Altena Sextet the unclassifiable Malcolm Goldstein and buck Raaimakers. STEIM was also a partner in the unique BIM House October Jazz Meeting providing support for composer/performers Richard Teitelbaum, Malcolm Goldstein, George Lewis, Earl Howard and Luc Houtkamp. To those who fear that electronic music is an art in decline, STEIM's response is enthusiastic support of those composers involved in the application of music technology in an expanding musical world.

A well received workshop on Technology for Women in the Arts was given by Composer Franke Mann. The participants included musicians and visual artists of all persuasions. A follow up session is planned for the fall of this year.

STEIM Collaborators
In the last year STEIM projects have been done with artists including Shelly Hirsch, Frankie Mann, Tom Cora, Peter Kurack, Laetitia Sonami, Scott Gresham-Lancaster, Ron Kuivila, Emil Tobenberg, Marie Goyett, Jonathan Inapet, Art Clay, Stephen Pope, James Fulkerson, Joniates Manzoli, Zbigniew Karkowski, Nënette Hogg, Michael Barber, Martin Spannariu, Sooja Muisser, Gene Carl, Rene Junker, Fred Kohliman and Miquel Jorda among others. STEIM workshops were given in Sweden, Spain, Italy, and France.

The Electro-Instrumental Virtuoso
The tapeless studio is as much making accessible techniques of the pioneers of tape music as it is making many of their actual methods obsolete. A new generation of performer/composer is bringing the coherence and excitement of live performance to pieces which draw as much from the classical tape music aesthetics as they do from live music traditions of such as jazz. A STEIM SYMPOSIUM will be announced at ICMC '92, on the general subject of electronic music virtuosity and the convergence of tape and performance music aesthetics.

Current Products
STEIM remains committed to custom instrument design for virtuosos and the grounding of all our design and research in the needs of particular artists. But much of the work done in recent years has proven to have wider application. Being a small studio we can only work with a limited number of artists each year but having found that many artists problems can be solved with simple customization of existing tools, we have made several products from our work space available to a more general public on a commercial basis. These
Technical Project descriptions

The Big Eye
A video image to midi device was completed this winter at STEIM based on the ACORN Archimedes. This relatively inexpensive workstation, built around the ARM3 RISC processor, extracts first order differences in a 256 x 256 image at video frame rates and interprets detected "motion" as midi events. It is fast enough for the application to be programmed largely in high level language.

SAM
Designed around the MAC II - DIGIDESIGN 5600! card. SAM is a particularly articulate sample player. As samples are stored using Macintosh memory and disks their size and inventory can be quite large. A variety of playing modes are supported via midi including among others independent control of sample length, start and end points, sample rate, enveloping and special effects.

SensorLab - SPIDER
The STEIM SensorLab is a small, general purpose, analog to Midi interface for the prototyping of musical instruments and interactive control systems. The SensorLab connects the real world of physical phenomena and gestures via Midi to personal computers and to Midi instrument and studio devices. The SensorLab has been through several revisions and more than a score of our systems are in active service in Europe and America. The instrument programming and configuration software, SPIDER, has been ported to the Atari, MS-DOS and the Macintosh. STEIM is currently working on a commercial partnership to help with future production and support.

RAIN
Joel Ryan's evolving real time DSP performance software ported to the DigiDesign Sound Accelerator card has been central to recent pieces including Enfolded Strang in collaboration with violinist Malcolm Goldein.

The Web
Michel Waisvisz Web is a hardware controller in general form of a spiders web, which allows a performer to grasp and manipulate several channels of continuous control at one time. The idea is to allow the coordination or mixing rather than the separation of parameters. The Web has gone through several editions recently and will be the subject of a workshop at the Institute of Sonology in the coming year.
New Products

Work is proceeding on the development of custom performance software for the Digidesign Sample Cell card in collaboration with composer Ron Kuivila. Extensions to the SAM software have been proceeding apace. Two different versions of an idea for an ephemeral Hall Effect hand controller of Joel Ryan have been implemented on the SensorLab by composers Laetitia Sonami and Jonias Manzoli. A midi tap shoe and ultra sound localization device has been developed for Marie Goyette. A multi-channel ballistic controller, a sort of "Midi Maracas", was built by Art Clay using the SensorLab. The RAIN real time DSP environment of Joel Ryan has been extended to new paradigms such as acoustic transmission line models and a special tracking playing mode. Artist/engineer, Bob van Baards has constructed a singing Tesla coil on a grand scale.