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How Do Laptop Performers Identify as Performers in a Musical Setting?

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An Annotated Bibliography

Laptops are a powerful tool that have become more than just a simple tool used for school or work. Laptops are being used to create music from at home recording studios, to performers creating music on their laptop in a live musical setting. Laptop Performers are becoming more accepted as independent performers. As more people begin to use a laptop as their main “instrument”, it is important to understand what aspects go into creating an identity as a performer. Furthermore, when looking at those characteristics, one must analyze to see if the Laptop Performers are able to take on those same characteristics and create their own identity as musical performers.

Albert, Jeff. “Improvisation as Tool and Intention: Organizational Practices in Laptop Orchestras and Their Effect on Personal Musical Approaches.” *Critical Studies in Improvisation- Etudes Critiques En Improvisation* 8, no.1 (2012).

<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/1558/2660>.

Throughout this essay, Jeff Albert talks about his experience in the Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana (LOL) and the different techniques that performers in the group would have been experimenting with. He talks about improvisation as a “tool” and as “intent”. As performers on new styles of instruments, improvisation begins to find new and creative ways to make music on those new instruments, but also create potential new ideas for their traditional instrument. Additionally, this essay talks about the different pieces that that LOL composed for the ensemble

and how those pieces are structured. When a performer or ensemble is trying to find their musical identity, it is important to try new ways of performing. Improvising with a certain “intent” can begin to create a certain sound, feel, and identity for the performer that might not have come about from traditional music reading.

Anderton, Craig. "The Live Performance Laptop." *Electronic Musician* 29, no. 01, (Jan 2013): 53-54,56-58.

Craig Anderton discusses how the laptop computers that are used in a musical setting are completely different than just normal laptops. There are many other tasks to keep in mind as a laptop performer is on stage. Anderton goes into detail about all the areas to think about as a live performer from storage to security to which computer is most beneficial for the gig. This article seems to be more along the lines of a DJ who is gigging in that sense, but many of the topics that are discussed are ones that a laptop ensemble/ orchestra would want to think about if they are in the early stages of starting out. When I was a part of an electronic music ensemble, many of the same discussions came up when troubleshooting performance preparation. By having the background of issues that may arise when performing on an electronic instrument, one can learn how to avoid those and truly focus on creating music and finding their own musical identity.

Booth, Graham and Michael Gurevich. “Collaborative Composition and Socially Constructed Instruments: Ensemble Laptop Performance through the Lens of Ethnography.” Paper at the 12th International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2012.

This article is talking about the compositional techniques of composers and musicians when it comes to composing for a Laptop Orchestra. The article also has a strong emphasis on the idea of ethnography. Ethnography is the customs of individual people and cultures which leads me to believe that performers have a certain style that is brought out when using the laptop as the instrument. In addition to understanding different styles, this article talks about the understanding of differences in each performer and how each performers background can drastically influence the way the ensemble is run. As a performer, ones background is always going to be influential on the way they perform as well as how they find their identity in that performance.

———. **“Inclusive Interconnections: Towards Open-Ended Parameter-Sharing for Laptop Ensemble” MA Thesis, University of Huddersfield, December 2010. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.**

In Booth’s thesis, he talks about the experience of the Huddersfield Experimental Laptop Orchestra. By looking through the table of contents, the reader can see that a large portion of the writing has to do with how performers work together from practical sense (undergraduate vs. postgraduate ensemble practice), but also the digital aspects. Performers that are using laptops to create their music go through different paths musically in order to find how they fit in.

Additionally, the thesis goes into detail about how to set-up the laptop orchestra and what to do once you have the necessary materials. The practice used by Huddersfield Experimental Laptop Orchestra is different than others because of the flexibility they use while performing.

De Souza, Johnathan. “Orchestra Machine, Old and New” *Organised Sound* 23, no. 2 (Aug 2018): 156-166.

The article by Johnathan De Souza is one that relates the “old” orchestras to “new” orchestras. After talking about the orchestra as a collective group of people rather than the stereotypical group of string and wind instruments, he talks about the set-up of each instrument. In this article, he talks more about the hardware and connections between each computer and how they are formed. This article is a good connection point to some of the other articles because of the diagrams that are included and how the “hardware” of these orchestras interact together to create the music discussed in other articles.

Grossmann, Rolf. “The Tip of the Iceberg: Laptop Music and the Information-Technological Transformation of Music.” *Organised Sound* 13, no. 1 (2008): 5-11.

Throughout Grossmann’s article, he talks about the laptop as more than just a piece of technology designed for business. It is a tool that can create using ideas from the past as well as incorporating tools of today into the practice. The laptop performer is not really bound to a certain criteria and that’s why Grossmann includes images and discussion about DJs, performers with turntables and laptops, as well as performers with guitars and laptops. The musicians that are using these tools are doing more than creating music. These musicians are using what they

know on traditional instruments and bridging the gap of computer music. Performers do not necessarily need to create a brand new identity when they start using the laptop as part of their act. All the performer needs to do is find a way to have the two work in harmony with each other.

Harker, Alex, Angie Atmadjaja, Jethro Bagust, and Ambrose Field. “The Worldscape Laptop Orchestra: Creating Live, Interactive Digital Music for an Ensemble of Fifty Performers.” *International Computer Music Conference, ICMC 2008, Belfast, Ireland. International Computer Music Association.*

While reading the article from Harker, the authors continue to offer an overview of what a laptop orchestra is. One topic that is new in discussion is the infrastructure challenges that come with using a large number of laptops on the same network. While this article is a little dated in terms of the internet, wireless internet, and the power of it, performers today still need to take that into account when performing away from the normal rehearsal space. In addition to the history and challenges that the actual ensemble, the authors talk about a few of the pieces that are used to perform with. In each of the descriptions, it breaks down the structure of the music as well as different applications that are necessary for the pieces. Since computer music uses is performed differently, the fact that some of the “scores” are not written down as they are in traditional music seems to be a shift. Understanding how new ensembles create music is extremely important to developing a performer’s identity.

Jaeger, Timothy. “The (Anti-) Laptop Aesthetic.” *Contemporary Music Review* 22, no. 4 (2003): 53–57.

In this article, Timothy Jaeger talks about how early composers like John Cage and Maruizio Kagel seem to challenge the way the audience interacts or “reacts” to the performer. In modern laptop performances, the performer is mostly behind the computer and there is a disconnect from the audience. Jaeger talks about the need to “add” something additional to the live set to create a connection with the audience. This is interesting because as a performer, there is always a strive to connect with the audience in a way and when there is a screen in front of you, it makes it hard to create that connection. This raises the question if the laptop performers identity is changed when they create a meaningful connection with their audience and how one can effectively do that. Jaeger seems to look at the connection in a more “avant-garde” way, but it is possible that not all performers have to go to those extremes to create the connections.

Kapur, Ajay, Michael Darling, Dmitri Diakopoulos, Jim W. Murphy, Jordan

Hochenbaum, Owen Vallis, and Curtis Bahn. “The Machine Orchestra: An Ensemble of Human Laptop Performers and Robotic Musical Instruments.”

***Computer Music Journal* 35, no.4 (Winter 2011): 49-63.**

In this article, the authors write about the pedagogical focus of combining musical elements of the laptop orchestra with the technical skills of of a robotic ensemble. They go into the history of the Laptop Orchestra (as with many of these articles). What makes this article different is how the CalArts campus is working with robots to have them play the music with the human performers. This article is very interesting because of the way that there is a human and “computer” interaction, but the computer is a robotic figure playing the instrument. When looking at an ensemble like this, there is a lot that can be considered when thinking about the identity of the performers. Is that identity going to be the same with the robots on the stage? Do

robots playing the instruments allow for the musical expression that human performers can achieve?

Trueman, Daniel. "Digital Instrument Building and the Laptop Orchestra" In *Frontier of Engineering: Reports on Leading-Edge Engineering from the 2010 Symposium*, 51-60. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2012.

Throughout this essay, Trueman talks about the instruments that they have built for PLOrk. In addition to the instruments that they are using, he talks about technical challenges of a Laptop orchestra as well as digital instruments as well as how humans interact with those computers. In this article, there are also details about how the performer interacts with the digital instruments. When working with digital instruments, there is a different type of structure that goes into making the music. This process is discussed at length in the essay. The topics brought up in this essay seem to reflect how the performer begins to create their own sound. Some of those performers will use additions to their own acoustic instrument that then adjust parameters in the laptop, and some others will be using completely new instruments that may not be used in the same way as a traditional instrument. For this reason, understanding how these digital instruments fit in with traditional instruments can be a contributing factor to the identity of a musical performer.

———, Perry Cook, Scott Smallwood, and Ge Wang. "PLOrk: The Princeton Laptop Orchestra, Year 1." *International Computer Music Conference, ICMC 2006*, New Orleans, USA. International Computer Music Association, 2006.

This paper discusses the state of the laptop orchestra after its first year in being an ensemble. The authors go into detail about what PLOrk is, some of the motivations behind creating an ensemble that is so unique and new for that time period, as well as discussing some of the software, hardware, and compositions that are used in this ensemble. As a performer, it is important to see what types of musical examples are out there for this ensemble and see if the score looks like a traditional score that musicians are used to. Developing a musical identity based on how music is performed and seeing how other ensembles start off can be extremely beneficial for new musicians in that field. By understanding common problems, musical intentions, and ways of performing music, performers can feel like they are in a comfortable setting rather than one that is new and not really interested in.

Zadel, Mark and Gary Scavone. "Laptop Performance: Techniques, Tools, and a New Interface Design." *International Computer Music Conference, ICMC 2006, New Orleans, USA. International Computer Music Association.*

The authors of this article talk about how laptop computers at that time (2006) were just starting to become more portable and useable in performance settings. Specifically, this article talks about Ableton Live and how this interface is beginning to make live performances much easier than before. The article also continues to talk about common issues that may come up as a performer (computer issues). Many articles talk about performance issues because of how temperamental laptops are and how things can easily go wrong when performing. As a performer, part of figuring out an identity is how to react when something does not go the way that it is expected.

