

EDITORIAL

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Almost half a year has passed since the publication of the first issue of *Riffs* Volume 4. Then, as now, the relationship between music and technology raises questions that strike at the core of what it means to be an artist in 2020. A number of the contributions to this issue were written early in the year, before the full magnitude of the pandemic was apparent. As such, it may come as a welcome relief that Covid-19 is barely mentioned in the following pages. Nonetheless, for many of us, the authors' descriptions of live music will be coloured by our experiences of the past year. This need not lead only to nostalgia or pessimism. On the contrary, the breadth of this issue of *Riffs* is indicative of the diversity of past, present, and future music-making. For all its disruption, and despite the potential long-term changes that will form part of its legacy, 2020 is an anomaly. At the time of writing, there are already tantalising glimpses of a return to a more recognisable musical world. When current uncertainties have finally cleared, it is evident that technology will continue to play a role, perhaps even more vital than before, in a familiar yet altered musical landscape.

Just as technology can draw together performers and audiences from across the world, it can also facilitate connections at a more local level. In his cover interview with Ian Davies, Moshino Royal (Rowan Coleing) discusses work created from a studio in Digbeth, almost within sight of *Riffs*' epicentre at Birmingham City University. Although deeply embedded within the Birmingham music scene, Coleing notes how technology, in the form of easily portable hardware and software, allows him to create music anywhere. Henry Morgan also focuses on the ubiquity of technology, but from the perspective of online fan communities. In his study of *genius.com*, Morgan analyses the ways in which the site's participants transcribe and annotate pop lyrics, becoming part of a complex, reflexive community of knowledge creation. As Morgan has noted, the shared endeavour of *genius.com* points to a sense of idealism, whereby technology empowers users to engage with, challenge, and subvert assumptions about hierarchies within the music industry.

The potential of new technology to effect positive change is developed still further by the composer Silvia Rosani. In describing some of the approaches that she has incorporated into her practice, Rosani demonstrates how music technology might be used to subvert social inequality within the field of contemporary music. Focusing on issues such as nonstandard venues, hybrid electroacoustic instruments, engagement with non-musicians, and the perceived barriers between performers and audience, Rosani outlines a series of practical measures to address the points she raises. In contrast, imagined musical futures take a darker turn in *Considerations of utopian and dystopian futures of music*, by contemporary recorder player Sylvia Hinz.

Envisaging a post-apocalyptic world, Hinz explores how, in the absence of electricity, the musical performer might reclaim roles that were formerly undertaken by audio devices. While not wholly optimistic, Hinz's words point to defiance in the face of adversity. As an expression of a deep, human instinct, music can survive even the most catastrophic events.

Sylvia Hinz's short poem draws attention to the experimental ethos that is at the heart of *Riffs*. Rather than occupying an intermediate, ambiguous space between writer and musician, text can be embedded within the artist's sonic practice. Regan Bowering's *Human/Machine/Rhythm* is a case in point. In applying the techniques of sampling to a pre-existing text, Bowering guides the reader through a series of processes, culminating in a highly performative piece of creative writing. In contrast to Bowering's process-driven approach, Anna Murray examines text from the perspective of linguistics and semiotics. For Murray, the interplay of music and words can provide a framework for research and practice. With examples ranging from fourteenth-century musical manuscripts, to Japanese Noh performances, to her own work, Murray examines issues of meaning and communication in relation to the composer and score, performer and performance, and listener. Throughout her work, technology plays a central role in facilitating what Murray describes as a 'multimedia' approach to composition with text.

Text is one of many strands forming the experimental practice of Garlic Hug (Helen Papaioannou and Alessandro Altavilla). As a multi-instrumental duo, Garlic Hug's use of acoustic, electronic, and digital sound sources, processed and organised both with and without technology, forms part of a dynamic and evolving approach to performance. Papaioannou and Altavilla illustrate how instruments, technology, experience, and the wider musical community continually shape their practice. Reading about Garlic Hug, I am immersed in my own reimagining of the sights and sounds of live performance. I picture the two musicians, seated opposite each other, beside tables filled with instruments and hardware. Although just out of sight, the audience – made audible by an occasional cough or rustle of clothing – is a vital component of my imaginary tableau, filling the darkened space with an almost visceral tension.

Throughout their writing, Papaioannou and Altavilla draw attention to ideas of fragility and awkwardness that inspire their live performances. For Garlic Hug, liveness seems closely linked to ideas of connection – between performers, audience, and the wider community of artists and practitioners. While these ideas might appear impossibly utopian at the end of 2020, it is a salutary reminder that our current, largely restricted experience of live performance is only transitory. Just as technology changes and evolves, so our experience of music – as performers, creators, and listeners – will continue to develop in unforeseen ways over the coming months and years.

Thinking about music and technology in relation to Garlic Hug and all the contributors to this issue, I am reminded of the words that formed the prompt for *Riffs* Volume 4:

'Technology is something I love and hate at the same time. On one hand the absence of any kind of technology means silence (or an environment of natural sounds which we hear much clearer because of the general silence); on the other hand, you need technology to make art.' [1]

Having experienced the highs and lows of online music rehearsals, live streamed performances abruptly silenced by buffering, and interminable video meetings, I feel as though I understand Kubisch's ambivalence and frustration. However, re-reading her words at the end of 2020, I am struck by another question. What about all the creators, performers, and listeners who, as a result of personal choices, circumstances, or a combination of factors, do not engage with technology? Despite the breadth and eclecticism of this issue, there are always more stories that could be told. As a creative, experimental publication, *Riffs* intends to provide a space for ideas, dialogue, and discussion that is larger than the sum of its parts. By now, reader, you have already stepped inside this space. As you take time to explore and discover what lies within, I hope you will find ideas that allow you to rethink, re-evaluate and reimagine your relationship with technology.

Edmund Hunt is a Derbyshire-based composer who writes instrumental, vocal and electroacoustic music. In 2018, Edmund became a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in composition at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, focusing on composition and live electronics based on the analysis of early medieval languages. During 2019–20, projects have included an electroacoustic composition for Longyou International Festival, China, a Cohan Collective Residency to create a 20–30 minute dance work with choreographer Edd Mitton, and an ongoing Sound and Music New Voices work for dancer, string quartet and live electronics. Edmund is a co-investigator of *Augmented Vocality: Recomposing the Sounds of Early Irish and Old Norse*, an AHRC-funded research project which began in November 2020.

[1] Christina Kubisch, 'Artists' Statements II, Christina Kubisch', in *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music*, ed. by Nick Collins and Julio d'Escriván, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017: 176).



