

“Collaborating with machines” by Tom Jenkinson.

The old preconceptions of machines (i.e.: drum machines, samplers, software) as inhibitive to “genuine” creativity / “soulless” etc. are now quickly evaporating. The machine facilitates creativity, yes, but a specific kind of creativity that has undermined the idea of a composer who is master of and indifferent to his tools—the machine has begun to participate. Any die-hard instrumentalists that still struggle to retain their notion of human sovereignty are exemplifying a peculiarly (western) human stupidity—resistance to the inevitable. What is also clear, though certainly undesirable by any retaining an anthropocentric view of composition is that this process proceeds regardless of any ideal point of human-machine collaboration (ie one where the human retains any degree of importance.) One might say that music is imploding in preparation for a time when there is no longer any need for it.

As is commonly perceived, the relationship between a human operator and a machine is such that the machine is a tool, an instrument of the composer's desires. Implicit in this, and generally unquestioned until recently, is the sovereignty of the composer. What is now becoming clear is that the composer is as much a tool as the tool itself, or even a tool for the machine to manifest its desires. I do not mean this in the sense that machines are in possession of a mind capable of subtly directing human behaviour, but in the sense that the attributes of the machine are just as prominent an influence in the resulting artefact as the user is; through his work, a human operator brings as much about the machine to light as he does about himself. However, this is not to say that prior to electronic mechanisation, composers were free and unfettered in their creations. As a verbal language facilitates and constricts our thoughts, the musical tradition, language and the factors of its realisation (i.e., instrumentation, limits of physical ability) were just as active participants in the compositional process as the “composer” was.

Idealists who believed such constraints were simply obstacles in the composer's way have laboured to relieve us of them, only to reveal that music is in fact contingent on the very existence of these restrictions, and was never a pre-eminent “form”. The “modern” composer, robbed of his constraints, finds himself in a wasteland of desolate freedom. The inconsequentiality of new classical music serves to illustrate this point.

However, for those who don't seek eternal freedom, help is at hand. Whatever may remain of the older constraints is of little consequence as music is now in the grip of a new restriction, the machine.

The machine can be a respite from the meaninglessness of musical freedom. Yet the old tendency to try to unfetter ourselves surfaces: instead of a collaboration, the machine is put at our service. Some of us still flatter ourselves with a certain sort of delusion whereby it is solely our conscious, rational thinking that directs our creations, and is manifest in them. Trying to force a machine to manifest a conscious purpose brings about a stifling and deadening process that only in our time could pass for “creativity”. It imposes that the didactic “collaboration” with a machine is a strictly one-way energy channel, from the user to the machine. In this situation, the machine cannot constitute a genuine “oppositional factor” in a

dialectical equation as it offers not the antithesis of the conscious human will but rather the negation of it. When being forced to “purpose”, all the machine seems to be capable of is resistance. It is not that the machine is a lifeless vacuum that continually absorbs inspiration and ideas from its user, but that the user hinders the collaboration by assuming he is the progenitor of these things in the first place. It is in this trick of perspective, from the humble “it happened” to the questionable “I made it happen” to the disastrous “I can make it happen” that lies the labyrinth of paradoxes that is our “modern” world.

The problematic relationship between humans and machines stems from the abject remnants of the modernist idea that we can control our fates, perfect ourselves and our surroundings, postpone or eventually eradicate death. (Anyone who is afraid of dying needs salvation, but not as they might say, from death, but in fact from life, and of course a retreat into dogma suits this purpose very well). This view holds that anything can ultimately be made a subject of our conscious will. However, bending something to our conscious will, whether that is a person, a machine, or a situation always manifests a compensatory and contradictory aspect. Something crops up which subverts our will. Yet it is never admitted that such subversions are simply the corollary of our obsession with conscious direction of our surroundings and thus the idiocy continues. It is in this attitude of blind hectoring that the machine user-artist limits the possibility of transcendence. In this situation, it therefore makes little sense to the user to do anything with the machine other than to try to utterly dominate it, or risk being dictated to by a sterile lump of plastic. Unfortunately, working with any material in a violent and dictatorial way simply produces artefacts of human stupidity, not art. Inevitably, the violence committed by the artist returns to its source. This is why many artists have gone insane, died young, or committed suicide. Although they are viewed as heroic, they are simply the people who have most consistently sensed the fundamentally ambiguous nature of all action and died fundamentally not from suicide or illness, but from despair.

One might say that the western tradition simultaneously holds anthropocentric views and yet makes scientific discoveries that continually point out that we are the center of nothing at all. (In that sense, we are all schizoid—we are all irreparably split, it is simply a matter of how you deal with it.) The use of machines has completed the abolition of anthropocentricity in a radical manner—that we are no longer even the centers of ourselves. Creativity does not seem to be an exclusively human activity anymore, but that begs the question, was it ever? Our actions may not come from our “thinking centre” that we hold dear, but rather from opaque rivers full of uncanny riches that we may have been lucky (or unlucky) enough to fall into, and strong enough to keep afloat in. (This river is only opaque in relation to the relentless “clarity” of our scientific orthodoxy.) It is clear when someone’s actions come from here, all else is pattern, habit and self deception. It is only our habitual obsession with knowledge and control that keeps us from this river, and maybe, for now, it is for the best.

It might be said that we can be possessed by ideas, inspiration, but ultimately they escape our control and our impulse to retain them. To attempt to possess anything

always brings about problems, particularly these high minded conceits, and is a poignant reaction to our dread of death, the ultimate negation of possession. We try to hide behind ideas of usefulness, the future, success, but all takes us further from the one thing we do possess—this moment.

In an era saturated with “activity” and devoid of prospects of personal transcendence, death becomes more and more imposing—no action, no transcendence, just dimensionless intangible void. This leads artists (people who admit their fear) to try to encode themselves into their work, so that the work can act as an ambassador, and ultimately as a concrete (ie: not organic) substitute for the self, and thereby escape the problem of bodily death. We hide behind our work to reveal an immortalized self. Our “creative process” is thus an attempt to simultaneously hide, and invite discovery. But as the emphasis (and significance in the creative process) slowly shifts from the human to the machine, artefacts that are more the product of machines than of human beings are put forth as immortalized ambassadors of the self. Like it or not, we are coming to be represented by machines. Thus we conclude that artists, predominantly musicians, are the first people to tacitly admit their deference to machines. Yet this is revealed in other ways elsewhere in society. We are losing our reticence to relinquish control or mediation of many aspects of everyday life lives to machines. Yet not only do we feel inferior to machines, but we are jealous of them, and thus the machine becomes the ultimate social currency: who owns the latest sports car/computer/trainers/software. It is not simply the implication of monetary superfluity that makes ownership of these things significant, it is deeper than that. It is because we have come to believe in machines, perhaps more profoundly than we believe in ourselves. Their perverse lack of self-knowledge renders them eminently more capable of transcendence. We are significant only in conjunction with machines; anyone who is technologically illiterate is becoming the modern day equivalent of a village idiot or a heretic, by way of a corresponding lack of intelligence or faith. It is actually advantageous to have simply the appearance of a musician, because the tasks of the music making can be delegated to what is eminently more trustworthy: the machine. The last attempt to retain human sovereignty over machines is to don them as a fashion accessory, symptomatic of a moronic cultural environment saturated with sloganeering and “attitude”, synonymous with the commodity oriented marketing strategies that underpin it, empty as the thinking behind it.

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