

# MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LAPTOP AS MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Judging by the language used to describe the laptop's role on the performance stage over the last ten years, many popular media outlets have come to accept the laptop as a musical instrument. While laptop ensembles and orchestras (LEOs) have played a significant role in this evolving public awareness, one cannot deny the impact of more danceable genres, often referred to as electronica. For certain readers, the term "laptop music" has quickly become a genre of music with its own expectations. As LEO practitioners, it behooves us to pay close attention to the way media outlets reinforce these expectations to the public so that we can be more effective advocates for what makes our art distinct. This presentation will identify key articles and stories in the evolving media presentation of laptop performance in electronic music, survey the way media factors into common stereotypes about laptop performance and raise issues that we as practitioners must address when faced with questions about and from the media.

Based on a survey of United States media items from the last 20 years, there appears to have been a turning point in late 2001 and early 2002 after which the language used to describe the laptop in musical performance starts to become more familiar. It was during this time that three items appeared in large publications with substantial audiences. The first was a short piece that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on 9 Dec 2001 entitled "Laptop Composing." The article attempts to take stock of the "virtual recording studio" trend, but also includes a references to Matmos providing "laptop accompaniment" for Björk's *Vespertine* tour and Herbie Hancock adding "an iBook to the instruments in his touring ensemble" [1]. The second item during this time period was a feature for the 26 Feb 2002 edition of NPR's *All Things Considered*. In the piece, Will Hermes laments that often "there wasn't a lot to see" during a laptop performance, but also astutely explains that "[l]aptop music is more an approach than a genre" [2]. The third and largest item in the group was a feature story in the May 2002 issue of *Wired* magazine. The piece ran with the ominous subtitle "First software turned the laptop into a musical instrument. Now who's in control: the machine or the musician?" [3]. Despite this, the article provides a useful survey of artists from the

electronica scene who were using laptop computers in performance, including their rituals and habits.

After this turning point, some of the novelty wears off and the the media uses language that mirrors descriptions of more established musical instruments with increased frequency, including the use of terms like "laptop gigs" and "laptop accompaniment". In 2003, *The New York Times* featured an article about the Share laptop "jam sessions" that attracted dozens of musicians to an East Village bar (a gathering that was also profiled in the 2002 *Wired* article). The article featured the expert input of Jon Appleton and one hears echos of an earlier theme in his quote that "the performers understand what they're doing, but the audience doesn't" [4]. The quote embodies the most common stereotype in laptop performance: that the audience struggles to determine a causal relationship between the physical actions on stage that the sound emanating from the speakers. This stereotype is repeated consistently in the media and even the highly regarded PLOrk is not immune from its effects. During their 2008 trip to perform at Northwestern University, the *Chicago Tribune* offered hope that the laptop might reintroduce the "cherished element of spontaneity that had been left behind" [5] in concerts of academic electronic music. The student paper was less understanding (and less kind), summarizing the performance by saying that members of the ensemble "might as well have been a bunch of students sitting next to speakers doing homework" [6]. The stereotype has become so pervasive that some musicians in the electronica scene feel the need to assert in interviews that they "are not at all a laptop act" [7].

It is unlikely that anyone is completely happy with the way laptop performers are depicted in the popular media, where *Girl Talk* [8] appears to get more attention than all of the \*LORks combined. While there are key distinctions between the work of LEO practitioners and their fellow laptop performers in electronica, the two strands are easily conflated by the media and public. Because the novelty of laptops on stage has worn off, tougher questions have started to come to the fore and LEO practitioners must be prepared to engage them. Why make music in a LEO [9]? What are the similarities and differences between LEOs and other laptop performers? Is laptop music an approach or a genre? How can we overcome the disconnect between

actions and the sounds they cause? Is the answer better education for our audience? Is the answer an expanded definition of the instrument [10]? And if the casual observer believes Girl Talk is the “patron saint of laptop music” [11], how can we ensure that the LEO community’s heroes of the faith are canonized too?

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