

How Electronic Music Began

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# How electronic music began

Herbert Eimert

The beginnings date back a little more than 20 years. This is not an occasion for anniversaries, but it seems appropriate to refresh some memories of that historic début—which so many would like to be associated with as ‘inventors’. In fact, there was nothing to invent—only a new way of listening, a new awareness. But ten years ago, people were more anniversary-minded. A medium-wave broadcast from Cologne-Hamburg, which lasted for almost one hour, recalled the musico-electronic events at Cologne ten years earlier. This repeat broadcast one decade after the event was an exact reproduction, without alteration or omission, of an original programme called *The Sound World of Electronic Music* of 18 October 1951, which introduced some interested listeners to the new form for the first time. Meyer-Eppler, Robert Beyer (my first collaborator), Friedrich Trautwein and myself took part in that first radio presentation of electronic music, and the record album commemorating the event also shows the date. Although Trautwein is no longer associated with the circle, his name should not be passed over, since he was commissioned by Radio Cologne, on the suggestion of Meyer-Eppler, to build an electronic monochord—though he never completed the commission, and the instrument was built by Cologne later in 1953.

It is generally possible to determine exactly when, where and by whom practical technical innovations are made. With regard to artistic matters, such claims for priority are usually more difficult to establish beyond mere dates: and viewed in historical perspective, they are easily ridiculed. The confusion which followed that first radio broadcast was partly terminological. Through Meyer-Eppler’s essay *Electric Sound-Productions* (1949) and Constant Martin’s *Musique Electronique* (1950) electric performing instruments such as the ondes martenot which had already reached the end of their development were promoted to the status of instruments of electronic music. In 1953, when the first electronic pieces by Beyer and myself were broadcast from Hamburg-Cologne, a radio-dealer called Siegfried Mager, son of the famous instrument maker, sent me a furious letter of protest, accusing me of spiritual theft, and submitting a treatise entitled ‘Jörg Mager, founder of German electro-musical research’. I was able to set his mind at rest with a short radio talk about his father’s role in the history and development of electronic music.

The pre-history of electronic music, represented by the development of electric sound-producers such as Cahill’s mechanical-electric organ without pipes (Dynamophon) and mentioned by Busoni in 1907 in an essay on visionary music of the future, is nowadays often treated as history. When this as yet unwritten pre-history is told, it should be made clear once and for all to what extent this ‘electronic’ idea of Busoni’s affected the instrument-builders. One cannot hold it against them that they were led, by

commercial interest, to imitate instrumental sounds. The same applies to Mager, Trautwein, Lertes, Vierling, Bode etc, whose extensions of timbre, decorative rather than intrinsic and radical, should not be compared with modern electronic techniques.

Oddly enough, Meyer-Eppler could not bring himself to call the electronic music which was starting to take shape in 1950 by that name. He coined the unfortunate phrase ‘authentic music’, and I was unable to convince him of its terminological unsuitability. His usage reached a grotesque climax in November 1953 with a demonstration of what Meyer-Eppler called ‘authentic compositions’ at the Rogowski Institute of the Aachen Polytechnic, in which I participated as an observer. Erich Tienhaus from Detmold, a builder of amplified harpsichords and sound-technician instructor, also addressed the audience, making extensive use of *Klirrfaktoren*. Between these demonstrations and the shrieking, croaking and banging sounds produced by Meyer-Eppler, accompanied by shouts from the students, the wife of a university professor from Aachen, accompanied on a Tienhaus harpsichord, played a violin sonata by Handel. Tienhaus described the electronic sounds as ‘diabolical’, thus establishing a genuine priority and clearing the way for an onslaught from Friedrich Blume, doyen of German musicology, a few years later. Unlike Blume, however, Tienhaus did not apply the axe to God’s sublime creation, but used numerous quotations from *Faust* to let the sun sing out in its old-accustomed way.

Adorno’s criticism took the form of a joke, which he did not hesitate to include in one of his publications. During one of the late-night pub-gatherings at the Schlosskeller in Darmstadt he compared the sound of electronic music to the sound of Webern played on a Wurlitzer organ—how quickly the new music had aged! Later, he produced another joke, this time with sociological undertones, when he declared that for the *Bastler*-generation of 1950 ‘the road from radio-ham to electronics enthusiast is not very long’.

But what, then, has become of electronic music? In the course of a conversation on German radio in 1968, Karlheinz Stockhausen said: ‘Electronic music needn’t be made more widely known than it is already. You have no idea how popular that music is . . .’. At a conference held to discuss experimental music in Berlin in the same year, Carl Dalhaus declared that electronic music was already dying out and had become a faded fringe-phenomenon, the affair of a small, unimportant group of sectarians hardly kept alive by the clichés of cheap publicity.

Although the term ‘electronic’ still lacks precision, it is too suitable as a comprehensive common denominator not to be universally accepted—just as we accept the terms ‘atonal’, ‘dodecaphonic’, or ‘serial’. The finale of Zimmermann’s opera *Die Soldaten* is pure undiluted *musique concrète*; but it is

electronic music just the same, and not only because it was the first work done at the studio of the Cologne Music Academy—which was founded in 1965 and which, with its new sound-equipment and semi-automatic production methods, will soon be the most versatile and best-equipped studio in Germany. My own 24-minute *Epiaph for Aykichi Kuboyama*, in which not a single electronically-produced sound occurs, is also electronic music.

The foundation of the Cologne Radio electronic studio was a truly unique event. For the last 20 years it has been the only studio in existence at any German radio station—and if this fact again is not generally known, the delay is just symptomatic of the usual historical process. Stockhausen has also examined the beginnings of electronic music at Cologne, notably in an essay called *Electronic and instrumental music* published in 1959. Right at the start of the essay we find the misleading remark—that ‘we owe’ the foundation of the studio to the Controller of Radio of Cologne. The reader may presume that the initiative for the foundation of the studio came from the Controller—whereas, in reality, the initiative was my own.

When the essay in question first appeared in *Die Reihe*, which I was co-editing, the misleading sentence was provided with an extensive footnote containing the real facts. The footnote, however, was suppressed when the essay was recently reprinted in Stockhausen’s *Texte*—a book in which, after 20 years, Stockhausen has unearthed a great deal of long-forgotten material. Positively unearthed, in one case, from the basement of a Paris post office, where he found a ‘large sine-wave generator’, which he recorded on disc in the presence of witnesses to produce ‘the first sound composition by purely electronic means’. It is a shame that just at the same time, in 1952, our technician in Cologne had recorded a great number of multiform sinus-tone patterns on tape from a *Schwebungssummer*. In the exposé mentioned above, Stockhausen continues: ‘At the suggestion of Goevyvaerts I carried out at the Club d’Essai in Paris the first experiments of synthetic sound-composition with sine-wave oscillators’—a definition not entirely correct, as these beat-generators (*Schwebungsgeräte*) do not necessarily produce pure tones. Stockhausen also mentions the regular exchange of letters with me at that time—and in a letter dated 30 December 1952 we notice the following passage: ‘Just today I find again that I really cannot take part in all this, because the possibility of realizing a sound-atom [*Klangatom*] escapes me entirely’.

This certainly proves that everything can present various aspects at various stages of our life. But the present aspect is now quite clear: electronic music celebrates its beginnings in 1952 in a postal basement in Paris, and continues throughout 1953 in Cologne, where the undisputed first Electronic Musician has just arrived. His description gives the impression that Cologne was a kind of minor branch of Paris until he achieved his first serial sine-tone composition (the importance of which is uncontested). The pieces realized at Cologne were merely ‘the outcome of *musique concrète*’. In 1952 we also seem to have used trautionium sounds, apparently from a miraculous instrument which

was not delivered until 1953. And truly we ‘... knew the electronic performing instrument of Jörg Mager’ which, according to the biography by Emil Schenk, was not built after 1930-1, and of which not one example survived the Nazi period and the war (the reference can, I suppose, hardly apply to my meeting with Jörg Mager at the music exhibition in Frankfurt in 1927).

Furthermore, in order to maintain the Paris-Cologne continuity for the year 1952-3, Stockhausen informs us that the analyses of his first electronic pieces in the special issue of *Technische Hausmitteilungen des Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunk* appeared in ‘late 1952’. In fact, there is a note saying ‘Received on 2 February 1954’ (the piece was actually published still later). To corroborate his thesis of the Cologne ghetto of *musique concrète*, Stockhausen then constructs a fairy tale about a ‘technical director’ at Cologne Radio who managed to set apart ‘a then considerable sum of money’—Stockhausen mentions a six-figure sum (in DM)—for financing the installation of the electronic studio.

In fact, in 1954, my request for only a hundredth part of that ‘then considerable amount of money’ for an extension of the first commission given to Stockhausen brought about a serious crisis which almost led to the closure of the Cologne studio, when the auditors realized that neither experimental laboratories with permanently appointed technicians nor ‘long-term commissions for composition’ were allowed for in the budget. At that time I was able to persuade the Intendant to transform the category of ‘long-term commission’ into a special-funds scholarship, an arrangement which lasted until 1962.

One last cheque, perhaps, remains to be cashed. Stockhausen has said that Meyer-Eppler did not agree with the term ‘electronic music’; but according to Stockhausen, ‘again and again I insisted on that name, as I felt how strongly it acted on me, how strongly it asserted itself’. In fact, after I had given the preliminary information to Steinecke, Beyer gave a talk at Darmstadt on (the as yet non-existent) field of electronic music. This happened in 1950, while Stockhausen was studying school music in Cologne (he handed in his school music-paper on 1 August 1951). In 1951 I gave a lecture on electronic music at Darmstadt. In 1952 one page of the Darmstadt programme, in January 1953 the first essay in *Melos*, in May 1953 the first public demonstration, at the beginning of September 1953 a lecture at the Club d’Essai in Paris, and on 8 September 1953 the first broadcast from the French radio—all these events, lectures, performances bore the name of ‘electronic music’. That is how the name ‘asserted itself’, and how it began.

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