

TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS

Product asked eight practitioners:



has technology advanced or undermined creativity in music?

Murder on the dancefloor

My initial reaction was to say 'Yes! It has done both'. From the fuzzbox that gave us the riff for 'Satisfaction' to the sequencer which gave us the reams of sterile 'typewritten' music of much of the 80s... but then again gave us modern masterpieces like 'Trans Europe Express' and 'The Man Machine'. So, when I think of it, technology is neutral. Creativity comes from the artist. Unfortunately, however, technology encourages people to think they are musically creative because they can use it to cover up their lack of musicality and the utter absence of any alpha waves in their brains. You could call it karaoke creativity. The democratisation of creative technologies has confused people. Say instead of giving everybody a computer you gave everybody a gun. Sure there would be a couple of gifted individuals who could shoot like the lovechild of William Tell and Annie Oakley but think of the senseless loss of human life. It's the same with creativity in music. For every bedroom Beethoven there are millions of musical mass murderers. Likewise, the genius of Grandmaster Flash needed the technology of the turntable but the turntable itself had no creative potential until he applied his unique creativity to its existence.

Alan McCusker-Thompson, director of Funky Star Creative Management, a Glasgow-based artist management company. www.funkystar.co.uk

New gold dream

Creativity will always exist; it's a fundamental human drive. Some find it hard to release this creativity and technology can be a great liberator, particularly for the enabling of more abstract impulses or even for helping to transmit accidental impulses of creativity.

But, at the same time, technology can act as a shield or a mask that allows the creation of 'end product' but disguises the fact that the perpetrator lacked any creative impulse besides the desire to simply 'produce'. This second condition has led us to the current state where we are drowning in product and too much time is spent trying to wade through all these transmissions to find the gold at the core.

Keith Mcivor, also known as JD Twitch, one half of Glasgow's Optimo (espacio) www.optimo.com

Smash it up

Talent is talent, and there's a very, very limited pool of it about. People who are talented tend to find ways of doing stuff that's brilliant whether that involves using technology or not, and people who are just kind of ok at things will do things that are kind of ok whether they've got the flashiest super-duper technology or not. The situation in music right now is, weirdly, a lot like that 120 years ago; nowadays everyone knows how to use Garageband and how to get their stuff on MySpace, whereas back then everyone had a parlour piano and played it for informal singalongs with their nearest and dearest. All of that amateur activity in the 1890s simply meant that everyone had an interest in how the music was made at their local concert hall; it didn't affect the number of truly great concert pianists in the world at all. Similarly, just because everyone knows how to make music on their computer doesn't mean that there is a massive glut in the number of really world-class bands right now. Anyway, all those parlour pianos got smashed up by exuberant crowds in the 1930s. Computers - fear your future!

John Harris, director of internet music label Seven Things. www.seventhings.co.uk

You're so modern

Found play their set as a production line behind them make hundreds of hand-made CD cases with rubber stamps, card, a guillotine and sewing machine, all of which are sampled live and incorporated into the band's set. The performance is recorded and, during our Radio Magnetic Soundsystem DJ set, burnt to CD with a finished copy, in the hand made packaging, given to each audience member. My Robot Friend wears a home-made TRON style suit, complete with flashing lights, a live steering-wheel mounted camera and a giant phallic flamethrower strapped to his glowing groin. These performances are excellent examples of how technology can be harnessed to great creative effect in music. Creativity has certainly never been harmed by advances in technology. The invention of the piano in 1700 gave composers an incredibly versatile tool for creation and performance, far superior to the undeniably beautiful yet limited harpsichord. Similarly, the Akai MPC changed hip hop, the Roland 808 inspired house and techno and MAX MSP and Ableton Live have changed the way bands and electronic artists behave in the studio or on stage. Just because technology makes something possible doesn't mean it should be done. However, the ingenious creativity exhibited by acts like Found and My Robot Friend, along with hundreds more, is refreshing, inspiring and encourages others to drive their art form forwards. If anything stagnates, it dies. This is just as true in music as it is in biology or business. Be it rock, jazz, classical or techno, deliberate ignorance of new technology is a far greater threat to musical creativity than the wonderful sounds and spectacle engendered by embracing that which it makes possible.

Dougal Perman, programme director, Radio Magnetic www.radiomagnetic.com

“Be it rock, jazz, classical or techno, deliberate ignorance of new technology is a great threat to musical creativity”



Sound and vision

Technology allows us to hear in new ways: to hear again, and to hear in a different order. There seems to be an explosion of interest in sound almost as artefact – the objectification of sound. In radio, I've done a lot of interview editing, and you get a real feel for speech as music – rhythms, melodies, pauses, patterns – when you're hearing small shards of it repeated during the editing process. You can isolate these, repeat them, reorder them; some sound poems have come out of that. Steve Reich's *Different Trains* is a beautiful piece, very moving, and it completes that cycle – takes fragmented speech-melodies and gives them back to live musicians. I suppose it can mean that making music can feel more like building and less like breathing, but that's not because of the technology, that's because it's non-linear, doesn't put the listener and the musician in the same unfolding time-place. But that's no different from other art forms where the final artwork is usually experienced in a linear way. Writing, filmmaking – they're non-linear processes. No one complains about writers being able to shunt words around and shape their impact. That's the essence of the art.

Jules Horne is a writer based in the Borders. www.texthouse.net

Caught by the fuzz

I am a composer. I write music down. Sometimes (most of the time) I also play around with 'found' sounds and various recordings of bits and pieces. I was recently at the Music Fair here in Frankfurt which, I'm told, is the world's largest. As I walked through the Computer and Multimedia Hall I saw I don't know how many presentations urging me to "explore your creativity, boost your creativity, ignite your creativity, engage your creativity, enhance your creativity, unlock your creativity, spark your creativity, fuel your creativity, improve your creativity, inspire your creativity, discover your creativity, free your creativity, express your creativity, jump-start your creativity, expand your creativity, stimulate your creativity, drive your creativity, support your creativity"*. After an hour I had a headache and left. A day later I was on the tram and saw something out the window. I'm working on a new piece at the moment and in that instant I heard the whole thing. Of course, by the time I got home it was all a bit fuzzy but I spent the rest of the evening trying to chase that moment. If only I could remember what it was I heard.

David Fennessy is an Irish composer who moved to Glasgow in 1998. He is currently in Frankfurt participating in the International Ensemble Modern Academy. Visit www.cmc.ie/composers or www.seventhings.co.uk

* These are all actual slogans of music technology companies.



“Parlour pianos got smashed up by exuberant crowds in the 1930s. Computers – fear your future!”

Got yourself a gun

A friend of mine once proffered a very convincing argument (I paraphrase here) concerning technology in creative practice and war. He suggested that as all technological advances come down to us creative types second-hand via the advancement of the US army's ability to blow people up, to utilise technology for the production of one's creative goals is to support the very capital function that wants to blow up critical thought. “We must see, learn to see that when the time comes to add up all the defeats and victories, very often we have been fucked and we've been fucked because we, I, didn't want to see, you, she, he, nobody wanted to see that all their dreams are represented ... he didn't want to see that all his dreams are represented at any given moment, given and taken back, by zeros which multiply them...”, as someone once said for Jean-Luc Godard.

The technology in my work? But I hate 'it'. Merely a means to an end that no more engenders than undermines; surely it depends who is in the director's chair? You know, I still carry around with me wherever I go, a small music-manuscript-notebook and a pencil. I guess they're my 'girl and gun'.

Peter Dowling is a composer and performer
www.steadykammer.net

Song for whoever

The penny whistle, the drum, the sound recorder and the computer are all technologies, tools that can be used with greater or lesser degrees of creativity. I am a technofan, so if the camps are being delineated, I'll pitch my tent in the technopark, with the freedom to go out into the wilds at will. In my camp I hope to meet intrepid adventurous types, open minded folks not adverse to gathering round the campfire of an evening to sing a song, but equally happy to sample it, bend it, shape it and share it the morning after. Yay for the internet and web 2.0, yay for the homegrown label that can carve out a niche for itself internationally because we can find it. Yay for the sound recorder that lets me catch a sonic moment. Yay for the computer that lets me explore the material nature of sound and even create music with my two finger keyboard skills and beginner clarinet player glee. Yay for the radio. Yay for the phone. And yay for all the fading technology, which in fearless, creative, musical and experimental hands led the way.

Zoë Irvine, sound artist, lives and works in Scotland. www.dialadiva.net / www.magneticmigration.net / <http://zebraphone.blogspot.com/>