

Revising the Future of Music Technology

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Abstract

This is the opening salvo in ***Sounding Out!*** 's April Forum on "Sound and Technology." Every Monday this month, you'll be hearing new insights on this age-old pairing from the likes of *Sounding Out!*

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Digital Media, Information, Politics, Sound



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This is the opening salvo in ***Sounding Out!***'s April Forum on "Sound and Technology." Every Monday this month, you'll be hearing new insights on this age-old pairing from the likes of *Sounding Out!* veterano **Primus Luta**, along with new voices **Andrew Salvati** and **Owen Marshall**. These fast-forward folks will share their thinking about everything from Auto-tune to productivity algorithms. So, program your presets for *Sounding Out!* and enjoy today's exhilarating opening think piece from SO! Multimedia Editor **Aaron Trammell**. —**JS, Editor-in-Chief**

We drafted a manifesto.

[Microsoft Research's New England Division](#), a collective of top researchers working in and around new media, hosted a one-day symposium on music technology. Organizers Nancy Baym and Jonathan Sterne invited top scholars from a plethora of interdisciplinary fields to discuss the value, affordances, problems, joys, curiosities, pasts, presents, and futures of Music Technology. It was a formal debrief of the weekend's [Music Tech Fest](#), a celebration of innovative technology in music. Our hosts christened the day, "What's Music Tech For?" and told us to make bold, brave statements. A kaleidoscope of kinetic energy and ideas followed. And, at 6PM we crumpled into exhausted chatter over sangria, cocktails, and imported beer at a local tapas restaurant.

The day began with Annette Markham, our timekeeper, offering us some tips on how to best think through what a manifesto is. She went down the list: manifestos are primal, they terminate the past, create new worlds, trigger communities, define us, antagonize others, inspire being, provoke action, crave presence. In short, manifestos are a sort of intellectual world building. They provide a road map toward an imagined future, but in doing so they also work to produce this very future. Annette's list made manifestos seem to be a very focused thing, and perhaps they usually are. But, having now worked through the process of creating a manifesto with a collective, I would add one more point – manifestos are sloppy.

Our draft manifesto is a collective vision about what the blind-spots of music technology are, at present, and what we want the future of music technology to look like. And although there is general synergy around all of the points within it, that synergy is somewhat addled by the polyphonic nature of the contributors. There were a number of discussions over the course of the day that were squelched by the incommensurable perspectives of one or two of the participants. For instance, two scholars argued about whether or not technical platforms have politics. These moments of disagreement, however, only added a brilliant contour to our group jam. Like the distortion cooked into a Replacements single, it only serves to highlight how superb the moments of harmony and agreement are in contrast. This brilliant and ambivalent fuzziness speaks perfectly to the value of radical interdisciplinarity.



<https://youtu.be/fl9KQ1Mub6Q>

These disagreements were exactly the point. Why else would twenty academics from a variety of interdisciplinary fields have been invited to participate? Like a political summit, there were delegates from Biology, Anthropology, Computer Science, Musicology, Science and Technology Studies, and more. Rotating through the room, we did our introductions (see the complete list of participants at the bottom of this paper). Our interests were genuine and stated with earnestness. Nancy Baym declared emphatically that music is, “a productive site for radical interdisciplinarity,” while Andrew Dubber, the director of *Music Tech Fest*, noted the centrality of culture to the dialogue. Both music and technology are culture, he argued. The precarity of musical occupations, the gender divide, and the relationship between algorithm and consumer, all had to take a central role in our conversation, an inspired Georgina Born demanded. Bryan Pardo, a computer scientist, announced that he was listening with an open mind for tips on how to best design the platforms of tomorrow. Though collegial, our introductory remarks were all political, loaded with our ambitions and biases.

The day was an amazing, free-form, brainstorm. An hour and a half long each, the sessions challenged us to answer a big question – first, what are the problems of music technology, then what are some actions and possibilities for its future. Every fifteen or twenty minutes an alarm would ring and tables would exchange members, the new member sharing ideas from the table they came from. At one point I came to a new table telling stories about how music had the power to sculpt social relations, and was immediately confronted with a dialogue about problems of integration in the STEM fields.

In short, the brainstorms were a hodgepodge of ideas. Some spoke about the centrality of music to many cultural practices. Noting the ways in which humans respond to their environments through music, they questioned if tonal schema were ultimately a rationalization of the world. Though music was theorized as a means of social control many questions remained about whether it could or should be operationalized as such. Others considered different conversations entirely. Joking sustainability and transduction as key factors in an ideal interdisciplinarity and

shunning models that either tried to put one discipline in service of another, or simply tried to stack and combine ideas.



Borrowed from Margaret Atwater.

Some of the most productive debates centered around the nature of “open” technology. Engineers were challenged on their claim that “open source technology” was an unproblematic good, by Cultural Studies scholars who argued that the barriers to access were still fraught by the invisible lines of race, class, and gender. If open source technology is to be the future of music technology, they argued, much work must still be done to foster a dialogue where many voices can take part in that space.

We also did our best to think up actionable solutions to these problems, but for many it was difficult to dream big when their means were small in comparison. One group wrote, “we demand money,” on a whiteboard in capital letters and blue marker. Funding is a recurrent and difficult problem for many scholars in the United States and other, similar, locations, where funding for the arts is particularly scarce. On points like this, we all agreed.

We even considered what new spaces of interactivity should look like. Fostering spaces of interaction with public works of art, music, performance and more, could go a long way in convincing policy makers that these fields are, in fact, worthy of greater funding. Could a university be designed so as to prioritize this public mode of performance and interactivity? Would it have to abandon the cloistered office systems, which often prohibit the serendipitous occasion of interdisciplinary discussion around the arts?



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There are still many problems with the dream of our manifesto. To start, although we shared many ideas, the vision of the manifesto is, if anything, disheveled and uneven. And though the radical interdisciplinarity we epitomized as a group led to a million excellent conversations, it is difficult, still, to get a sense of who “we” really are. If anything, our manifesto will be the embodiment of a collective that existed only for a moment and then disbursed, complete with jagged edges and inconsistencies. This gumbo of ideas, for me, is beautiful. Each and every voice included adds a little extra to the overall idea.

Ultimately, “What’s Music Tech For?” really got me thinking. Although I remain skeptical about the United States seeing funding for the arts as a worthy endeavor anytime soon, I left the event with a number of provocative questions. Am I, as a scholar, too critical about the value of technology, and blind to the ways it does often function to provoke a social good? How can technological development be set apart from the demands of the market, and then used to kindle social progress? How is music itself a technology, and when is it used as a tool of social coercion? And finally, what should a radical mode of listening be? And how can future listeners be empowered to see themselves in new and exciting ways?

What do you think?

Our team, by order of introduction:

[Mary Gray](#) (Microsoft Research), [Blake Durham](#) (University of Oxford), [Mack Hagood](#) (Miami

University), [Nick Seaver](#) (University of California – Irvine), [Tarleton Gillespie](#) (Cornell University), [Trevor Pinch](#) (Cornell University), [Jeremy Morris](#) (University of Wisconsin-Madison), [Diedre Loughridge](#) (University of California – Berkley), [Georgina Born](#) (Oxford University), [Aaron Trammell](#) (Rutgers University), [Jessa Lingel](#) (Microsoft Research), [Victoria Simon](#) (McGill University), [Aram Sinnreich](#) (Rutgers University), [Andrew Dubber](#) (Birmingham City University), [Norbert Schnell](#) (IRCAM – Centre Pompidou), [Bryan Pardo](#) (Northwestern University), [Josh McDermitt](#) (MIT), [Jonathan Sterne](#) (McGill University), [Matt Stahl](#) (Western University), [Nancy Baym](#) (Microsoft Research), [Annette Markham](#) (Aarhus University), and [Michela Magas](#) (*Music Tech Fest* Founder).

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Read the Manifesto here and sign on if you dig it. . . <http://www.musictechifesto.org/>

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Aaron Trammell is co-founder and Multimedia Editor of Sounding Out! He is also a Media Studies PhD candidate at Rutgers University. His dissertation explores the fanzines and politics of underground wargame communities in Cold War America. You can learn more about his work at aarontrammell.com.

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