

It's Not That Simple

by Nicolas Collins

When I was young, I had the good fortune to be able to tour and record with David Tudor, one of the founding fathers of American live electronic music. David used an idiosyncratic mix of homemade circuits, commercial effect boxes, and cassette tape players, arranged in complex feedback networks. One time I was helping him debug an ornery signal path that, on close examination, consisted of a chain of amplifiers, some of which were boosting the signal while others were lowering it; the net change of level was negligible. Someone suggested replacing the five boxes with a cable. "It's not that simple," replied David. "It wouldn't sound the same."

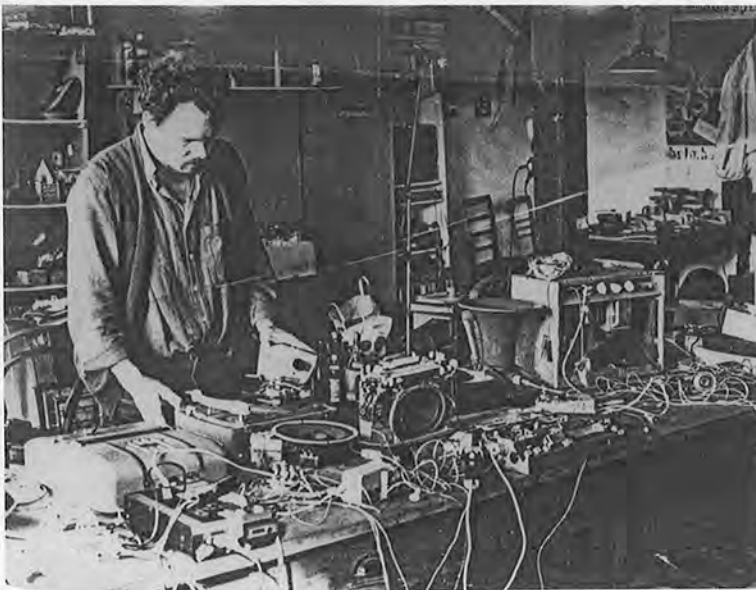
Some years later, in 1987, I heard Voice Crack for the first time, at the Vor Ort festival in Hannover, Germany. Over the course of the 1980s, "electronic music" had gradually shed its avant-garde associations, decamped from the studio, and trickled into concert halls and bars around the world. Electronic sound penetrated rock, rap, improvisation, and "serious" composition alike. But it felt as though ninety-nine percent of it came from one of three sources: samplers, MIDI synthesizers, and digital delays. Andy Guhl and Norbert Möslang filled the Eisfabrik with the other one percent.

Subsequently, I have taken every opportunity to program them in concerts and festivals in which I have had a hand. Shortly after I began teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999, I invited them to speak with my students. In my introduction, I referred to their circuitry as "simple" —which at first glance it might seem, placed side by side with a laptop or synthesizer. "It's not that simple," replied Andy.

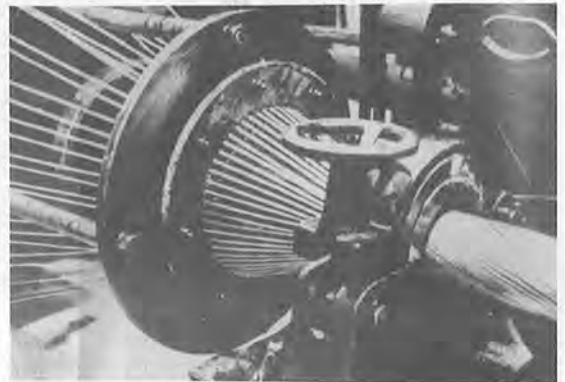
Indeed. In the last decade, I have witnessed the surprising resurgence of handmade electronic music, and I've learned that it is important to distinguish between "simple" and "elemental." A simple circuit produces a finite set of sounds; an elemental one is no more limited than a vibrating string or a puff of air. Voice Crack tapped the elemental essence of silicon, and the world is a better place for this.

1987

Draht 2, Grabenhalle, St. Gallen



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