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Forgotten Future #1 Magical Sound Machines

One day the Emperor received a large package
labeled The Nightingale.

But it was not a book. In the box was a work of art,
an artificial nightingale most like the real one.

Thirty-three times it sang the selfsame song without tiring.

Hans C. Andersen, The Nightingale, 1849

Recorders – Transmitters – Generators

Long before the advent of electrification, people began developing automatic mechanical recording devices for their musical pleasure, and the many constructions that have been built since then continue to enchant us: music boxes, barrel organs, cylinders, records, optical tapes, paper tapes, magnetic tapes and disks, and with them the accessory perforating, punching, cutting, blackening, drawing apparatuses as well as those for reading and playing back the stored data.



Fig. 1: Electrical sound transmission

In 1796 the Bratislava-born pianist and composer Josef Chudy staged *The Telegraph* or the Long-Distance Type Writer, an opera in one act, at a theater in Pest, with the intention of both entertaining his audience and introducing it to the optical and acoustic telegraph he had invented in 1787. This laid the foundation for electrical sound transmission. Nearly a century later in 1883, one of the main attractions at the International Electrical Exhibition in Vienna was a concert via telephone line in which the singer was in Korneuburg and the pianist in Baden. This was followed from 1885 onward by a flurry of

activity across the continents: Alexander S. Popov in Russia, Nikola Tesla and Reginald A. Fessenden in the USA and Guglielmo Marconi in England forged the way for radio signal transmission and all ideas and experiments connected with the radio.

1900 was also about the time when “by serendipity” physicists came up with the first electroacoustic sound generators. An incredible plethora of experiments produced a wide array of electric instruments, and in 1932, for example, an orchestra of the future with electric cello, trautonium, electric violin and theremin performed at the Berlin Radio Exhibition.



Fig. 2: Exhibition
“Magical Soundmachines”

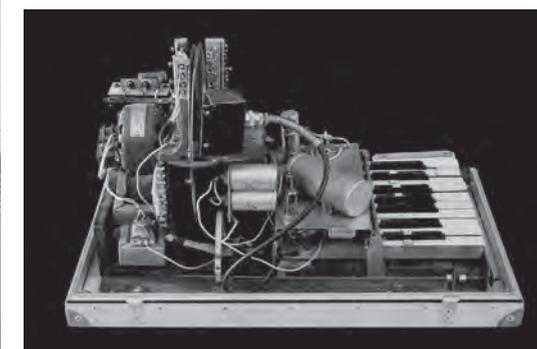


Fig. 3: Rhythmicon

In 1840 Ada Lovelace wrote the first computer program and foresaw a machine that would be capable of composing elaborate music of every degree of complexity imaginable. Binary thinking and the rasterization of the analogue world led to digitalization, the realm in which the universal machine records and transmits and generates.

For the selection of the sound machines in the exhibition “Magical Soundmachines” [1] it was especially important to us that the objects were playable, because in this neoanalogue age we want to learn what these apparatuses have to tell us, what secrets they hold – we are fascinated by their sonorous materiality.

Composers, musicians, theoreticians and visitors revived selected sound machines like the Edison Home Phonograph, the Speaking Machine, the Rhythmicon, the Max Brand Synthesizer or the Akaphon on display in the exhibition and reinvented them.

The IMA Institute of Media Archaeology focuses its attention on a “forgotten future” waiting to be rediscovered, with the aim of re-examining and continuing to explore these forgotten visions.

References

[1] Exhibition organised and curated by IMA Institute of Media Archaeology at Kulturfabrik Hainburg in co-operation with the Vienna Museum of Technology September 2008 to April 2009