

Causality and Striking the Right Note

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From the very beginning, for me, electroacoustic music was about performance. Studio work certainly played an important role, but that role was primarily to prepare material for the stage. I wanted, and therefore built, instruments that were portable (well, at least as much so as an old Altec-Lansing bass reflex speaker), and let me perform with others. And by performance, I mean both “scored” material, as well as the ability to improvise. This was both physical and emotional, where gesture, action, and reaction were key.

But then, as now, I am frequently challenged by the nature of performance. The question that repeatedly comes to mind is: why is this “live”? What difference does it make? Is there anything being brought to the material that I am listening to that would not have been there if it was just tape playback? I must confess, that I have the same emotional and intellectual response to watching someone huddled over a laptop as I did 20-30 years ago when they were huddled over a Revox tape recorder. The more invisible the gesture and the more tenuous my perception of the correlation between cause and effect, the less relevant it is to me that a performance is “live”. Hence, I want to talk about instruments and design, and how design embodies a philosophy of performance, as well as human perception.

Designing electroacoustic musical instruments informed my later career in approaching the design of other types of devices. Coming full circle, I will also speak about the ways in which my collective work experience has brought new insights about the design of instruments.