

Electronic Music in Performance

There is a long tradition of performance in electronic music. Pieces written for Ondes Martenot and Theremin were live, and Cage presented *Imaginary Landscape* for phonograph recordings in 1937. In the 50s and 60s artists such as Gordon Mumma and David Tudor traveled with suitcases and crates of gear that they would assemble into a stage full of gadgetry. In the 70's rock acts like Emerson, Lake, and Palmer brought electronics into popular venues. More recently Laurie Anderson and Radiohead have taken the idea in exciting directions. The DJ tradition came from a different source, but is being combined with the old avant-garde in clubs and stages around the world.

The Problems of LEMP

Live electronic music performance has always had to overcome three big problems, which can be summed up as reliability, visual interest, and attitude.

Reliability

There is nothing more pathetic than a performer with stage full of gear that doesn't work. This applies to pianists as well as electric artists, but somehow you seldom see a piano blow a fuse in the middle of a show. That's because piano manufacturers have had 300 years to get the bugs out. Once upon a time the audience would laugh with you (up to a point) because this was obviously cutting edge stuff, but today's listeners expect you to meet the same standards as MTV—flawless seamless entertainment. They have no sympathy about the fact that you just installed a Windows service pack.

Visual Interest

Classical music performance happened in people's living rooms. The people lived in places like the palace of Versailles, true, but it was a social occasion and the audience had an excellent view of the performer as well as lots to look at around the room. Today, the performer is a tiny figure on a distant stage in a darkened hall. Successful concert artists look interesting, even from a distance. We joke about the most flamboyant, but the audience eats it up. A pianist flings his arms at the piano, a conductor (usually entirely unneeded by the orchestra members) dances on the podium. On the other hand, there's nothing inherently exciting about someone sitting at a laptop—they could as easily be checking their mail.

Attitude

Unfortunately, some performers don't take their own music very seriously. Musicians who understand the need to spend months learning Beethoven will give a show that seems made up on the spot, with no sense of progression, no logical endings and obvious surprise at what happens (and what doesn't). I suppose this is left over from the days when anarchy was the point, and if the sounds were cool enough the actual music did not matter. A few of those artists are still in business, but most have either grown up or gotten out. The modern audience knows who is in control and who is not.

How to make your Performance Bulletproof

The mantra for performance is well known.

If anything can go wrong, it will.

How do you create the show where nothing can go wrong? Here are some tips;

Plan Your Show So you Have Enough Gear

Surprisingly, the most common equipment failure is leaving it home. Diagram your setup and make a checklist of all items. List the big pieces and all of the little stuff. Check items when you pack to go to the gig (and when you pack up after the show!)

Do not assume any item will be available. All you can count on is a single AC plug. A "house sound system" means speakers and some sort of board. Don't count on monitors—set up your own in-ear system.

Check out the Venue and be Sure You Can Interface

What does the venue provide? Is the house system workable? Look at the board and input connectors on stage.

What's your output format? Balanced? Can you cope if all they offer is mic inputs? How many lines to the board do you need? Should you bring a snake? Is the AC adequate?

Invest in Rugged Versions of Vital Gear

Identify the key components of your system. Set up your stuff, and stare at each item for a couple of minutes and imagine the consequences if it goes up in smoke. If the result is a show stopper, acquire the most reliable version you can afford. Apply this to everything. Do you wonder why some power strips are made of plastic and cost four bucks and some are metal and cost twenty? (You don't carry your own power strips? You trust the one the stage manager scrounges from the ticket booth?)

Routinely Replace Vital Gear

How many times has your guitar cable been would up tight to fit in the case? After a couple of years it's an embarrassment waiting to happen.

Isolate Flakey Gear

We all have unique or vintage items that are lovely, but frankly fail from time to time. Make sure their failure won't bring other things down. So a questionable reverb should be used in an insert of the mixer, not patched after the main output. Then if it acts up, you can just yank the plug and you won't miss a beat. A classic synth should not be your only keyboard if there's any doubt it will get through the show.

Back Up as Much Gear as Possible

This doesn't just mean carry a spare. Have musical alternatives, so any section of the show can be done more than one way. Spares are a good idea where feasible. If you have more than one of any item number them so you know which was the bad one after you get home from the gig.

Label Your Cables

The second most common cause of failure is wrong connections. The light on stage is miserable, you are in a hurry, people keep interrupting you. The easy fix is this: Set up in your rehearsal space, and label each plug to match the jack it is plugged into. I know this seems silly because you have to search for the cable that is labeled instead of grabbing the first 1/4 inch that comes to hand, but it speeds up the setup (grab a cable, plug it in where it says. Hey, someone could help you without messing it all up!) Labels also make it simple to troubleshoot the problem. You can see immediately if one is in the wrong spot.

The best way to label a cable is to use stick on labels (Avery 5/8 x 7/8 are my favorite) with a layer of clear tape wrapped all the way around the plug. Place them so you can read them with the plug pointing up. Why clear tape? The stickum on the label only lasts a few months, and the tape also protects the label so the writing doesn't smudge.

Label spare cables too. Just put a number or letter (the same number, silly) at each end so you can figure out where a cable comes out on the other side of the drums. Colored tapes are great on mic cables, because you can see from the mixer who has which mic.

Label the Gear Too

That exciting black on black color scheme marketing departments favor is a pain in the rear on stage. If the connection labels, or even the front panel labels are at all hard to read, make your own. If you take a bit of time you can make nice looking ones with a printer:

- Design the labels in a graphics program that lets you control the size & put a box around each. The boxes make it easy to cut straight.
- Print on ordinary paper.
- Cover the label area with clear packing tape (makes it tough).
- Put double stick tape on the back (scotch double sided will stick for years.)
- Cut the label out with scissors.

While you're on this labeling kick, put your name on everything. A good stationary store can sell you a roll of 1000 labels with the printing of your choice. You can also get white paint markers that show up well on the black boxes. You might also want to engrave your name on your gear. That helps recovery after it is stolen.

Labels are easily removed by heating them with a hair dryer. Any leftover residue can be cleaned off with lighter fluid or (careful what you use it on) Goof-off.

Riveting the Audience's Attention

Give a show that's fun to look at.

Eye Contact

The audience hates to be ignored by the performer. Of course there are moments of concentration, times when you are alone in the universe, just you and the sound. But other times you are sharing with the audience—a joke, an interesting lick, showing off your technique. Set up so you are facing the audience most of the time, or can turn toward them at worst. Never set up with your back to the audience. They'd rather see you than the gear.

Lighting

Dim is sexy, but you aren't having sex on stage (at least not in my class)! You've worked years to earn a place in the spotlight, bask in it. If lighting is set up properly, you'll be seen with little discomfort. It's particularly important that your facial expressions are visible. Bright lighting is necessary in large stages, so be prepared for warmth. If you play dark little clubs a lot, you may want to invest in a light or two of your own.

When you get really serious you will do lighting design. If you wear makeup, test it under the stage lights.

Clothing

Once upon a time, musicians performed wearing the livery of their patron. This gradually morphed into white tie and tails, which you still see in the classical world. Post modern performers tend to dress in street attire, but it's not the same attire you wear on the street. If your thing is sweatshirt and torn trousers, take care in picking the right sweatshirt and torn trousers, and don't wear them for anything except performances. There are two reasons for this. For the audience's benefit, your costume should make you stand out on stage. Simple textures and contrasting colors help outline the position of your body. For your own benefit, performance clothes help you prepare psychologically for the show.

Activity

Set up the stage so you have to move around. Perform standing if possible, and even if you must sit use plenty of body English. If your act revolves around a laptop, use some sort of performance interface. If the audience can see how your hand movement is shaping the music, they will hang on every gesture.

Video

This is a growing trend, and is promising when done well. The problem is video can easily overwhelm the music and performer. Never invite a VJ to the gig to just play some stuff. The video must be well planned and executed, so the video artist must work closely with you, including getting your approval for material and rehearsing with you.

In a large venue, it's OK to put the performer's image on the screen, but avoid the temptation to do PBS style production. A simple fixed camera will usually do.

Attitude

If you want to be a pro, take a professional approach.

How to get good at whatever it is you are doing

- Practice—even if all you do is push a few buttons, figure out the tricky spots and woodshed them.
- Record what you do and listen to it.
- Practice—run all the way through from beginning to end. Do it again.
- Write it down. It doesn't have to be ready for publication, but it should be clean enough for you to read.
- Practice—Shut off your computer and practice launching your application and finding your files.
- Play for your friends—listen to what they say, without saying anything back (except thank you). You don't have to do what they say, but try to figure out why they said that.
- Practice—take all of your gear apart and pack it for moving, then put it all together and run through the show.
- Develop a version that is half as long. Then develop a very long version.
- Practice while wearing your costume.
- Figure out how to jump from one section to another, or how to go back and repeat something.
- Practice with all the lights out.
- Perform every chance you get.

What about stage fright?

All of the above will help, but if you find you are susceptible to stage fright (who isn't?) here are few tips:

- Think of the fun you are about to have performing. It's fun when you do it in the studio, isn't it? The audience is just there to share the fun.
- Give yourself time to mentally prepare. Turn off your cell at least 15 minutes before you go on. Find a quiet spot, and just blank your mind. Visualize doing everything exactly right.
- Set up a pre-show ritual. Visiting the bathroom, checking the connections, warm up scales, anything, as long as you can do the same set of activities before every show. Include it in your practice sessions well before the concert date.
- Wear your lucky socks. Really- have a show costume, and only wear that for shows. It's OK if it looks like what you wear every day, just as long as you know this is your show suit.
- Sip a little water. Avoid eating much else for a couple of hours before going on. (Green apples are good for dry mouth.) Pay particular attention to your caffeine level. You want to be alert, but not shaky. Any sort of medication is probably a bad idea.