abstract, having lost all reference to traditional musical timbres and narrative. Above all, this music was driven by the discovery of a new sonic world inhabited by sounds that had never been heard before.

While producing highly virtuosic music, early electronic music composers were nevertheless constrained to construct their pieces via painstaking tape-manipulation techniques, cutting and splicing tiny sections of recorded electronic material. Expensive and enormous, electronic equipment was confined to well-funded research centers at universities and radio stations. In the mid-1960s, however, Robert Moog and Donald Buchla began to produce small and relatively inexpensive modular synthesizers, opening the world of electronics to rock and jazz. But these early instruments had their limitations. Monophonic keyboards and complex patches made them cumbersome and still slow to work with. In reaction, the music industry moved quickly to produce digital synthesizers with polyphonic keyboards and presets in place of patches. Presets may have been useful for rock and jazz musicians; but they effectively thwarted the sonic experimentation and discovery so valuable to the previous generation.

Fast forward to the early 1990s. A technologically adept generation raised on home computers and video games begins to explore the equipment at its disposal: discarded analogue synths and drum machines picked up at junk shops, DJ equipment, the latest computer hardware, and commercial and homemade software. In their own bedrooms and basements, they began to recapitulate the experiments and discoveries of early electronic music. It's not surprising, then, that this generation has come to hear the whole history of electronic experimentation as vital and contemporary: to learn from Stockhausen, Pauline Oliveros, and David Tudor as well as Kraftwerk, Afrika Bambaataa, and Juan Atkins, and to draw upon these sources to make experimental music that lands squarely between the concert hall and commercial pop radio.

NOTES

1. The tracks described are “Luotain” and the opening of “Vapina” on Pananoni’s Kulma, Mute/Blast First 9032.

53

Introductory Remarks to a Program of Works Produced at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center

JACQUES BARZUN

Renowned historian Jacques Barzun (1907– ) helped to found the discipline of cultural history. His father, Henri-Martin Barzun, was a noted poet who, as early as 1913, composed Dadaist “simultaneous poems” to be performed with phonographs; and Guillaume Apollinaire, Marcel Duchamp, and Edgard Varèse were regular visitors to the family’s Paris home. In 1919, Jacques Barzun moved to the United States to attend Columbia University, where he also received a doctorate, became a professor, and remained until his retirement in 1975. He is the author of more than thirty books of history and criticism, among them Darwin, Marx, Wagner (1941), The House of Intellect (1959), Classic, Romantic, Modern (1961), The Use and Abuse of Art (1974), and From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life (2000). An early champion of electronic music, Barzun was invited to introduce the inaugural concerts of music at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, established in 1959. The concerts, held at Columbia on May 9 and 10, 1961, featured works by Otto Luening, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Milton Babbitt, Mario Davidovsky, Bülent Arel, and Halim El-Dabh. On each night, Barzun delivered this brief address, offering advice for listening to electronic music. More than forty years later, his advice still seems apt.

Your presence here, at a concert of electronic music, is a compliment to the composers, as well to the Universities that sponsor their work; and while I extend to you a welcome on behalf of the Universities I also wish to convey the composers'
hope that you will be as gratified by hearing their works as they are by your willingness to listen.

No doubt your expectations are mixed. You are ready to be surprised, to have your curiosity satisfied, and possibly even to experience snatches of enjoyment as you would at an ordinary concert. If that is your state of mind I am fairly sure you will not be disappointed. But it may be that you are here in a mood of combined trepidation and resistance: this, after all, is the Age of Anxiety... Or you may be bent on proving that electronic music is not music—doing this by the most painful test of endurance—or else you may be feeling caught because you have been brought by a friend and friendship is dearer to you than prudence.

If for these or any other reasons you are ill at ease, allow me to suggest a very few considerations which should make you more serene, while leaving you your full freedom of opinion, your entire right to dislike and reject. I suggest, to begin with, that we are not here to like or approve but to understand. And the first step to understanding a new art is to try to imagine why the maker wants it the way it is. That is interesting in itself, even if we ultimately disown the product. To understand in this fashion does not mean to accept passively because someone says that the stuff is new and therefore good, that many believe in it, that it's going to succeed anyway, so it's best to resign oneself to the inevitable. This kind of reasoning has gone on about modern art for some thirty years and nothing has been more harmful to the arts. It is an inverted philistinism, which eliminates judgment and passion just as surely as did the older philistinism of blind opposition to whatever was new.

What then is the decent, reasonable attitude to adopt? Very simple: make the assumption, first, that the old style—whatever it is—has exhausted its possibilities and can only offer repetition or trivial variations of the familiar masterpieces. I do not suggest that you should be convinced that your favorite music is obsolete. I invite you to assume that it may be: for by trying to think that it is, as the new composer obviously has done, you will begin to discover what he is up to. By way of encouragement let me remind you that you make this very assumption automatically four or five times in every classical concert, in order to adjust your ear to the changes in style between Bach and Mozart, Mozart and Richard Strauss, and—if you can—between Strauss and Alban Berg. If styles and genres did not suffer exhaustion, there would only be one style and form in each art from its beginnings to yesterday.

But, you may say, electronic music is something else again; it is out of bounds; the jump is too great. There is no semblance of scale, the sounds are new, most of them are in fact noises. Ah noise! Noise is the most constant complaint in the history of music. In the heyday of music it was not only Berlioz and Wagner who were damned as noisy. Mozart before them and Haydn, and even earlier Lully and Handel. I suspect that the reason Orpheus was torn to pieces by women is that he made horrendous noises on his lyre while they were washing clothes at the river in what they thought was melodious silence. The argument of noise is always irrelevant. The true question is: does this noise, when familiar, fall into intelligible forms and impressive contents? To supply the answer takes time. One hearing, two, three, are not enough. Something must change in the sensibility itself, in the way that a foreign language suddenly breaks into meaning and melody after months or years of its being mere noise. As a veteran of the premiere of Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps in Paris, I can testify to the reality of the change. At the end of the piece, the conductor Pierre Monteaux turned around amid the furious howls of the audience and said that since they had liked the piece so much he would play it again. The response was no better and the police had to quell the tumult. But now, fifty years later, the young accept those hammering rhythms and dissonant chords as if they were lullabies. They relish them while dallying in canoes, at the movies to accompany Disney's abstractions, and at the circus, where the music is used for the elephants to dance to.

Associations, in short, and assumptions rule our judgments. They govern our feelings, which we think are altogether spontaneous and truthful. But our sensibility is always more complex and more resourceful that we suppose, and that is why I have ventured to bring to your conscious notice what you knew all the time but might not allow for sufficiently in listening to electronic music for the first time.

The word "electronic" suggests a final objection with which it is well to have come to grips. Most people of artistic tastes share the widespread distrust and dislike of machinery and argue that anything pretending to be art cannot come out of a machine: art is the human product par excellence, and electronic music, born of intricate circuits and the oscillations of particles generated by Con Edison, is in contradiction in terms. Here again the answer is simple: the moment man ceased to make music with his voice alone the art became machine-ridden. Orpheus's lyre was a machine, a symphony orchestra is a regular factory for making artificial sounds, and a piano is the most appalling contrivance of levers and wires this side of the steam engine.

Similarly, the new electronic devices are but a means for producing new materials to play with. What matters is not how they are produced but how they are used. And as to that we are entitled to ask the old questions—do we find the substance rich, evocative, capable of subtlety and strength? Do we, after a while, recognize patterns to which we can respond, with our sense of balance, our sense of suspense and fulfillment, our sense of emotional and intellectual congruity? Those are the problems, beyond the technical, which our composers have tried to solve. We shall now attend to their handiwork with pleasure and gratitude (I hope) and certainly with a generous fraction of the patience they have themselves invested in their efforts to please us.