

Wensdi 8 July 1981

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Greetings--

Half past six in the morning and nobody loves me. Instead of suburban peace and quiet, the wreckers across the street have been going a-a-a-kk! with their yanking nails out as they remove roofs and let walls fall. And haul some of the lumber off to Tijuana (at least from the license plates on the trucks that is my educated guess.)

Changing and trimming down the pickups on the green Megalyra (other side) to avoid all the rubbing of the strings against them, especially when being transported.

Then you can take it while the yellow one is being fixed. We may have to end up handwinding strings for Contra C.

The other blue ~~Meg~~ Drone Instrument has pickups installed at last, I Q O Z (in quest of zonk).

At least this much is definite: the various layouts and variations in size and stringing have now been tried in practice and in public. These instruments are ready to be copied if and when orders come in. Next to task is beyond my powers: locating a custom small shop with say three or four people in the firm, to copy these instruments when they are ordered.

Further experiments are COMPLETED: no longer to be hashed over or debated: the actual sound comes from loudspeakers in boxes. This means that you must have more amplifiers and more boxes. The tone-quality is determined very largely by the box. And just at the right time to get this independently confirmed, along comes Chris Banta who has designed speaker boxes.

The impact of the pickups on the Drone Instrument is because of the speaker-boxes.

I think much of the disillusionment and disappointment and nasty invective about electronic music, tape-manipulation, amplified instruments, and computer music, has been because of the worn wrong amplifiers and the wrong speakers or even the right speakers in the wrong boxes.

I was shocked, back in October 1947, to find that B. F. Miessner, who had devoted much of his life to amplifying the piano, put the (comparatively small) speaker inside the piano set stool. Here was this Baldwin Parlor Grand, about a 6-footer if I remember correctly, and you know how big its soundingboard would have been, and he expected the tone to come through a smaller speaker box than the average home radio of that period (1930-1940) when he was most active in dreaming up and inventing the "improved" pianos. In his later inventions he put in a 100-Hz high-pass filter! What that means is that any fundamentals lower than G# bottom line of bass staff were blocked! I.e., because the average piano has very little fundamental in the low bass region, he took that as desirable. Here is the bitter consequence of the Division of Labor,

the Specialization which arose in the 19th century as and was at its height about 50 years ago when I was a miserable preteener. The engineer was not supposed to play the piano he was designing, and the pianist was not supposed to have any input to the manufacturer of the pianos he was supposed to practice on 8 hours every day for the concert stage.

The inventor, in this case Benjamin Miessner, took the DEFECTS of average pianos as manufactured at the time he was inventing, 1930 or so, as LAW. Not what I want as composer, or what prominent composers alive in 1930 wanted, and not what great pianists of the 1930's wanted, and not what Mozart or Beethoven might have wanted, or what even some bigwig of the 1850s or 1870s might have asked for or dreamt of or wished he had, but WHAT THE AMERICAN PIANO MANUFACTURERS OF SAY 1920-1930 WERE TURNING OUT. Without question, without asking Why?, without asking How Come?, without any regard for the future of music and reasonable provision for that future.

I was severely scolded by a number of persons, some of them experts or successes, some of them mere amateurs or dilettanti or hobbyists or people on the way up. Different age-groups, all the way from 14 to 70. There were NO GENERALISTS then. Interdisciplinary approach was forbidden. It didn't really have to be forbidden because nobody dared anyway. I was not supposed to look at the Total System all the way from composer to listener, by way of instrument. I was supposed to concentrate on one link in the chain and forget that the link was to be put into any chain.

I hope your interest in Systems has something to do with this point I just made!

In a way we have the computer to thank for the change of attitude. If a printout machine or a keyboard is not designed with the total system in mind, the computer won't work. If the designers don't have the whole chain in mind from input to output, nothing will function.

But 1930 inventors thought that they could improve the piano without knowing anything about piano tuning or how an action works or what future composers wanted or what listeners preferred to hear or how much of the effort and control of a pianist gets through the machinery and how much does not and is therefore wasted effort and wasted training and technique. Just saw out the soundingboard and stuff the space with a shelf-ful of radio parts and turn on the current and get it patented and sit back and rack rake in the millions. Well it was a big failure.

If he had started with Cristofori's original piano and amplified that, it might have been a very different story.

The manufacturers seem to think they have God-Given Authority to ram whatever they please down the consumer's throat and do not care even slightly whether their product is used or not, so long as it is sold. In a way our revolt is against them, *and* against their philosophy. The whole Do-It-Yourself Movement, of which we are part. (The Hearst papers back in 1940-1950, wanted to kill the doityourself movement and ranted and raved against it.)