

Future Shock

**Frank J. Oteri on the legacy
of ACO's Orchestra Tech
Initiative five years later**



Despite the claims of Wall Street stockbrokers or side-street fortune-tellers, anyone's assessment of the future never quite turns out exactly as prognosticated. Of course, statistically speaking, the world of so-called "classical music" is almost always a safe bet, especially when it comes to orchestral music. The orchestra has pretty much stayed the same since the turn of the previous century.

But things are changing even in this time tested neck of the woods, and most of this has to do with new technologies. Who would have imagined that there'd be a billion downloads onto things called iPods by now? And we know that at least some of those downloads have been of classical music. There's also the whole blogging phenomenon which has found its way into all aspects of our lives. Now there are blogs that offer the best writing about classical music out there. There are even orchestras using PalmPilots to project program notes at concerts. But of course the real innovation happens with new compositions.



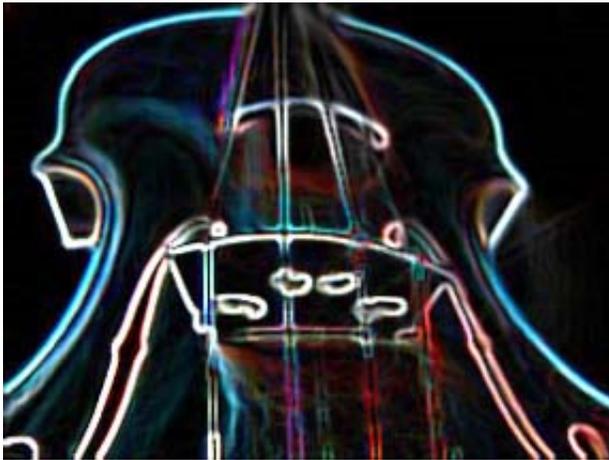
It's been nearly half a decade since the American Composers Orchestra presented [Orchestra Tech](#), a week of concerts and symposia charting the past, present and future of melding the worlds of the orchestra and electronically-generated sound. It's probably too soon to tell if the majority of the speculations posited during *Orchestra Tech* will ever come to fruition. But a good cross-section of what's been going on since then will be featured on the ACO's next concert, "[Tech & Techno](#)" at Zankel Hall, a multi-purpose venue perfectly suited for such a program that was only a dream five years ago.

For some of the composers on the program, composing music which merges the 19th century technology of orchestral instruments with the 21st century technology of the computer is nothing new. According to Edmund Campion, the composer of *Practice* and a participant in 2001's Orchestra Tech events, it's part of the zeitgeist of the past decade. "I don't claim special credit for being hip to newer technologies; it is the most travel-worn pathway of our time."

Campion claims what he's doing here is not a whole lot different from what composers have done throughout history. "But unlike Chopin and his piano, the computer is not a defined instrument that one masters over time. The computer is a set of patterns capable of morphing into any number of

instruments for any number of purposes. My subject remains music, but my practice of allowing new technologies to alter my 'Practice,' means my music will continue to change."

Of course, new technologies have also been responsible for very clearly defined new instruments such as Todd Reynolds's self-described iFiddle which will be the solo instrument featured in the new *iFiddle Concerto* composed by Neil Rolnick. And, since Reynolds admits that he only "began calling my axe an iFiddle about a year or so ago," it really is a development that has occurred in the aftermath of Orchestra Tech.



"I realized, rather than playing an 'electric violin,' which already has such a hefty history and definition, and which could actually be called an "e-violin" if you follow today's parlance, i.e. Electronic mail is email, I actually deal wholeheartedly with information and data which is delivered through electricity, but is a completely different animal both conceptually and physically."

For Rolnick, however, it's ultimately "about making a real contemporary violin concerto" and the newness of Reynolds' instrument is just a fact of 21st century life. "While I'm aware that the technology is a hook, it's all so much a part of the way that I work that it seems transparent. Writing for technology is a piece of cake. Writing a concerto which will sweep up the audience in an expressive display of virtuosity and a dramatic interplay between the soloist and the ensemble for 20 minutes is an exciting challenge."

For other composers, the central role that technology plays in their music is a result of their own immersion into various contemporary popular music styles all of which are far more driven by technology than most contemporary classical music. For Mason Bates, whose *Omnivorous Furniture* uses a laptop and a drum pad, using these tools are a natural outgrowth of the work he does as a DJ and electronica artist. Similarly, Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR), whose *Call Them All* will involve the participation of DJ Scientific, a turntablist-laptopist (Did those words exist five years ago?), bringing these sounds into an orchestral concert is an extension of DBR's mission to bring the worlds hip-hop, rock, funk and classical music closer together. Ironically, the one work on the program that does not directly use technological means to create the music, Justin Messina's *Abandon*, is inspired by early '90s techno music and uses the orchestra to "create an acoustic counterpart" to this purely electronic idiom

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