Response to Harry Lehmann's "Digitization and Concept" (Issue 7, *Search Journal for New Music and Culture*)
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To the editors of *Search*: thank you for inviting me to respond to this article, which I find both timely and insightful. In particular, I think Lehmann does well to split the piece into two sections, with the first attempting "to chart the furthest ramifications of the impact of digitization on composition" (2), and the second tightening the first's conclusions to explain why the digitization of New Music "will lead to a Gehalt-aesthetic orientation of this art" (9). Via this two-pronged approach, then, Lehmann unpacks the pressure that digitization exerts on existing practices and understandings of New Music, thereby implicitly challenging the reader/New Musician to adjust her criteria for evaluating New Music to meet the demands performed by new technologies.

Reflecting on the essay, though, I wonder about the role that categories play in it. That is, to the extent that Lehmann's thought experiment is aimed at New Music, it depends on the latter meaning something clear and definable both prior to and after digitization's intervention. Indeed, Lehmann's careful Gehalt-oriented conclusion addresses this, but how much is this conclusion predicated on a notion of pre-digital New Music that is—if not particular to the author—not as universally accepted as the author leads us to believe? As just one example, the claim that music scenes that have differentiated themselves as a result of musical self-questioning "have not challenged the self-identity of the composed music that is taught at academies and performed in concert halls alongside works from the Classical-Romantic tradition" (11) would seem very much to depend on which concert halls and academies one attends: I cannot think of a single university music composition program in North America that doesn't give at least as much weight to Cage or New York minimalism or quasi-improvised music (for examples) as it does to Lachenmann and Grisey. Similarly, I have regularly lamented the infiltration of New Music programming by vapid attempts at musical multiculturalism and ill-fated efforts to capitalize on fusions of experimental and popular genres, but these trends are nonetheless certainly part of New Music concert halls today. The point is that, like it or not, it is no longer tenable to insist on a unified narrative of an authentic approach to composition. [Relatedly, I expect that many scholars of popular music would disagree that the latter's concepts "are not based on any discursive background knowledge that has to be gained by intellectual means" (13). Indeed, the even provisional separation of intellect and embodiment that such a claim depends on is undermined by the accelerated practices of digital technologies that Lehmann cites earlier in his argument (i.e. when he notes the augmented emphasis on listening that digitization ushers in).]

In short, I wonder if Lehmann's argument doesn't build too much into the premises that ground it—in particular, substituting a notion of what New Music composition *should be* for the multiplicitous practice that it is—rather than engaging the challenges that are particular to digitization. This isn't to undermine the argument per se, but rather to resituate it as a thought experiment whose aim is to stress-test a hierarchical and culturally specific construction of New Music against the force of digitization. My point,

then, is to insist on the constructed-ness of Lehmann's history—which naturalizes both New Music and its relation to digitality—in order to ask a simple but important question: what might a different construction of New Music bring to the argument? This question is beyond the scope of this short response, but I expect it would result in our being able to register certain *already existing* digital music practices that Lehmann does not consider, and whose reverberations are considerably more radical than the "maximum possible impacts" (1) outlined in the first section of Lehmann's essay.

And isn't this the point? Rather than fortifying the borders of New Music—a practice that inevitably leads to a reciprocal celebration of the hybridity that comes with these borders' transgression, which has its own problems—why not place New Music and digital technologies in a feedback relationship that isn't concerned with categorization? From this perspective, we might begin to learn something from the myriad practices of digital sound that already obtain, ranging from Second Life performance ensembles to tactile musical interfaces for the deaf to medical, military and advertising sound technologies such as "sound bombs" and ultra-/infra-sound [which Aden Evens has argued might actually inform the affective dimension of our listening more than our conscious aural perceptions, and which Steve Goodman has recently connected to a general "(sub)politics of frequency"]. Indeed, why not similarly probe digitization in search of the ways that it supplements the normalizing force of the "finite number of intrinsic aesthetic values in human perception" (10) with the infinite variability of (post)human embodiment? In this, the goal would be to develop new concepts that are open to at least the possibility that digitization might bring with it new modes of sensation, perception, and movement.

Finally, then, investigating digitality might involve not simply moving past categories such as New Music (and its sub-categories of creation, realization, and "the composition process itself") but actually taking seriously the performative dimension of these categories, the ways in which they always claim more than they speak. Simply put, digitization (like other, earlier, technologies) reveals an alibi character of New Music, but its most impacting consequence is not so much this revelation as it is the new couplings, logics, and mediations which have only an incidental relation to either digitality or New Music taken separately, and which may very well leap into the past to re-construct an alternate history of New Music (and thus also an alternate New Music).