Interactive Sonic Arts
Reading Response 05
Kieran Maraj

There were a lot of interesting elements and ideas in Magnusson's writing, and I find myself in agreement with his major argument that instruments contain the ideas, knowledge, and memory of the cultural circumstances in which they were produced. In a way, this feels like a really obvious and intuitive thing, but it's nice to go more in depth with this idea, as Magnusson does. It certainly makes me wonder about what ideas are getting encoded in to my own instrumental systems, especially those that make their way in unintentionally.

One thing I found particularly interesting was that instrumental agency could be traced back to the medieval era, that it's not something new and of our own time. There are several instances where Magnusson notes how there were shifts in conception, such as placing the modern separation between music and science in contrast with a less pronounced distinction between the two in the seventeenth century, that really contextualizes and puts on to a much longer timeline what often feel like new ideas - "computational arts" being just one example of how that particular distinction seems to blur again in the present. Everything that's old is new again.

As mentioned, I found the undercurrent that digital luthiers are not also performers or composers for their instruments to be an incredibly strange one. Waisvisz's practice of "freezing" an instrument and then working with it for extended periods of time feels both intuitive and familiar to me, and Magnusson's description of digital luthiership appearing non-musical doesn't ring true at all - while developing I usually have my controllers all connected and ready to immediately test and try out new features. It's certainly not a silent process.

The last thing I'll mention is that I find it surprising that Magnusson, with his comments on how it's become easier for more people to become involved in making DMIs, doesn't really touch on the possibility of extremely intimate and personal new instruments (I haven't read "Digital Organology" yet, so maybe he touches on this there or elsewhere). When discussing the Karlax and Linnstrument, one of his primary concerns is with how to spread the use of those instruments, to make them more accepted amongst a wider populace, like traditional instruments. I understand this, of course, and I imagine that more widely played instruments carry a wide set of knowledge and memory, but at the same time it seems to me that one of the affordances of DMIs is that they *can* be so personal and personalized, carrying a different sort of knowledge. But perhaps my own attraction to this idea of highly personalized, extremely individualized instruments is a product of my own capitalist enculturation.