

"Imaginary Landscape: Electronics in Live Performance, 1989 & 1939" **Nicolas Collins**

Abstract for paper to be presented at "Audio Arts Symposium", Linz, September 1988

Consider John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape #1*. Written in 1939 for two variable-speed record players, test records of pure electronic tones, and muted piano and cymbal, it is famous as one of the first pieces of live electronic music. But less obvious aspects of the composition are perhaps more revolutionary. Instead of using any of the expensive electronic instruments of the time, such as the Ondes Martenot or Theremin, Cage chose the record player — an affordable appliance, never before thought of as an "instrument", which could theoretically be played by anyone. With a prophetic eye toward alternative performance venues, the score specifically suggested that the piece be performed for "recording or broadcast". Finally, the sounds were indeed placed in a landscape, organized in a radical new way that mimicked the way sounds exist in life, rather than forcing them to "sound like some old instrument" (as he complained in his 1937 manifesto, *The Future of Music: Credo*). This intertwining of technology with its musical and social implications distinguished this piece from other music of the time and from any electronic music produced for at least 20 years, and is one of Cage's most important contributions to 20th century music.

Following the heyday of post-Cagean electronic music in the 1970s, the role of technology in contemporary music begs for re-evaluation. Pop music has displaced the avantgarde at the cutting edge of electronic instrumentation. Many of the major figures of that earlier era, and most of the younger emerging composers, have shifted their attention back to more traditional instruments.

This paper will focus on the three main issues I see at the core of this change: the "bell curve" of the evolution of musical electronic technology; its intersection with the rise and fall of Minimalism; and the long-term significance of the ideas first presented in "Imaginary Landscape".