For 50 years, Sweden’s pioneering electronic music studio EMS has provided a haven for Scandinavian and international explorers. From text-sound composition via modular synthesis to digital sound design, Frances Morgan maps the changing dynamics around an institution that continues to reshape the politics of electronic music.

Photography by Klara Källström & Thobias Fältt

On a cold February morning, I am sitting in a room in Stockholm’s Electronic Music Studio watching a 1963 clip from Swedish national TV. Norwegian composer Knut Wiggen has been invited onto a news programme to tell viewers about a new way of making music – with computers. As if in the grip of a gentle cosmic storm, the TV studio hums and whistles with the unearthly sounds of a composition by Jean-Claude Risset, one of Bell Labs’ computer music innovators. “You can see Knut Wiggen getting into the highest state of listening, and the reporter is quite sceptical,” observes Mats Lindström, director of EMS since 2004. “It ends with the reporter asking, ‘What are you going to say to the people who don’t think this is beautiful?’ And Knut Wiggen says, ‘Maybe they are listening in the wrong way.’” he laughs. “So he is really convinced.”

A year after Swedish viewers were given a taste of digitally controlled sound, Wiggen moved a step closer to realising his vision of the music of the future. As a director of Fylkingen, the Swedish society for avant garde art and music that was set up in 1933, the composer had instigated courses in electronic music at Fylkingen’s headquarters, but had been pushing for a designated space for electronic music research and composition for some years. When his Fylkingen colleague Karl-Birger Blomdahl took over as head of Swedish Radio, he requested that a studio be set up, with Wiggen in charge, and so the Elektronmusikstudion (EMS) began to take shape at the radio station, in the centre of Stockholm.

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UTOPIAN

WORKSHOP

The computer controlled studio at EMS, Stockholm, 1980

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EM | The Wire | 33
electronic music and sound should do, how it interacts with other art forms, and also its philosophical and political implications for the wider culture. For every composer who felt that to develop music technology was to work towards a utopian, post-instrumental future, you might find another convinced that to do so was to buy into an automated, exclusive technical elite.

These debates took place in earnest in Sweden in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. There was plenty of space, time and resources to think about these things. ‘As Magnus Haglund wrote in The Wire 210, the creative climate in Sweden was fed by a fertile combination of state support for new and experimental art from the Social Democratic government, a receptive national radio, and a questioning attitude among the artists themselves, leading to a society he describes as an “alchemical workshop” where artists such as radical sound poets Oyvind Fahlström (whose 1963 radio work Birds Of Sweden is an un-Cliché of Swedish experimentalism) and Åke Holmlund formulated “new ways of connecting sound and language structures.”

Meanwhile, as well as nurturing local talent, Fylkingen was instrumental in bringing international artists to Sweden, programming concerts by Xenakis, Stockhausen, and John Cage and David Tudor at Stockholm’s Modern Museet (Museum of Modern Art). Recording technology was central to what would eventually be known as text-sound composition, a phrase that emerged from the work of composer Lars-Gunnar Bodin and poet Bengt Emil Johnson, who produced a series of pieces for radio in the mid-60s under the collective name Semikolon; (the punctuation mark is deliberate). Tape manipulation and concrete sound furthered the process by which language could be broken apart and reconfigured, resulting in acoustic works that broke away from both the page and live performance. This wasn’t a straightforward process, as Bodin attests. As an instigator of the Fylkingen courses given by Gottfried Michael Koenig in the early 60s, he was convinced of the potential of a studio, and created his first piece at EMS in 1965. “It was an intermedia piece that involved texts, physical actions and slide projectors and film,” he recalls. ‘But I couldn’t do it myself because I didn’t have the training, so I had to engage one of the engineers from Swedish Radio to do it privately.’

“We had a slow start, because practically none of the first group of composers had any formal training, he continues. ‘The first pieces we did in Semikolon; were not allowed to touch the equipment. It was the German style, you know, with the tonecaster [producer] who did everything, and we would say, could you put a little reverberation there? I’d like a filter on that voice and so forth, but we had no hands on. So it was an enormous thing when EMS introduced the old-drama studio [from Swedish Radio] and what was then named the Sound Workshop. They left the old mixing desk and tape recorders to EMS. Then we could have hands on, but we didn’t know what to do with it. We had to fight problems and that made us come up with ideas. We gradually learned how to do it – it was the long and hard way, but finally I think we could do something that had some value.’

Three Semikolon; pieces from this period were released last year on London label Paradigm Discs. They are hard-hitting, urgent works that hold true to Johnson’s aim, expressed in a 1969 Fylkingen bulletin, of creating works which “express feelings, values and contemplations of life which are characteristic of our own time, and this means it is often stamped and partially created by the new technology.” One, the starkly titled “Vietnam”, collage of the sounds of blasting windows with calmly read news statistics and sharply cut fragments of speech can you imagine it emanating from a radio set at the time, all too familiar and deeply disturbing, like a broadcast abruptly sabotaged. Bodin’s text-sound works are sometimes prefixed with “Seance”, as if to make clear the uncanny disembodiment that occurs when voice is severed from physical presence and possibility. While he has continued to work with text and language (he mentions a current live project in which he reads text over a prerecorded soundtrack, and has recently held sessions at EMS titled Composing With Words), it is clear that the concept of the voice, and its textual and formal possibilities, rather than an interest in literature, was the real focus: “I never wrote songs or vocal music, I wasn’t interested in that, but the concrete poets opened a new horizon, so to speak,” he says. At the same time as Stockholm was becoming known as the home of text-sound composition, and Bodin as one of its main movers, he was also composing delicate electroacoustic works such as Toccata, an intricate tape piece from 1969. His contemporary Jan W Morthenson remembers it well: “It was so impressive, because we all knew how much effort it took to cut tapes and glue them together — the technique was incredibly tiresome,” he says. Recalling EMS’s earliest days, he remarks: “Oh, they had such a primitive studio there — it’s incredible how such good things could be done there.”

“Jan was one of the radical composers during the 1960s,” Mats Lindström tells me. “Maybe he won’t want to be reminded, but he was trying to throw out the piano from Fylkingen and ban instrumental music.”

When I visit Jan Morthenson the day after my visit to EMS, he doesn’t seem to mind when I mention it. Born 1937, Morthenson recently moved from his home north of the city back to Stockholm, to a flat in a block designated for artists — a mark of his many years of involvement in composition as well as academia, video art and abstract painting. In 1960 he was an active member of Fylkingen’s board and the editor of its magazine. While most experimental activity in the city went on at the Moderna Museet, Morthenson also helped organise a festival for art and technology at Stockholm’s technical museum — a precursor of today’s collaborations across arts and sciences, with concerts in science museums and artists in residence at research centres like CERN.

“Toccata was a manifesto, ordered by the board of course, saying that Fylkingen should only play electronic music in the future, and totally leave the instrumental part of new music,” he says mildly. “Well, everything was very black and white at that time, and we had other organisational ideas for new music here, so we thought they should take care of that. There was a sense in Fylkingen that this was the future; and instrumental music was made and composed and listened to for totally other purposes than electronic music. We wanted to make a clean start.”

Unsurprisingly, while Bodin tells me support for an “alchemical workshop” was to buy into an automated, exclusive technical elite.

“Ten years ago we had one guest composer per year; now we have over 50,” Mats Lindström