

UTOPIA AND



The computer controlled studio at EMS, Stockholm, 1980

WORKSHOP

For 50 years, Sweden's pioneering electronic music studio

EMS

has provided a haven for Scandinavian and international sonic 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 & Tobias Fäldt**

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.

This year, EMS celebrates a half century of electronic music making. It is now a fully independent organisation, affiliated to neither the national radio nor the Swedish College of Music that funded it for a time. Since the mid-1980s it has been based in Södermalm, the densely populated island district that houses much of the city's cultural life, and is one of many arts organisations and companies in München Bryggeriet, a former brewery complex that sits right next to the water and is also Fylkingen's current home. The cosy open plan space on the ground floor of the huge 19th century building could be the offices of any small media or arts organisation, were it not for the glimpse of a room next to the administrator's office, which is an organised chaos of synthesizer modules, patch cables, soldering irons and testing equipment, overlooked by a framed poster from a Lee Perry concert. The open plan entrance leads off into six studios, which include two multichannel studios, a studio with speaker system for live monitoring and two rooms that house EMS's Serge and Buchla synthesizers. An upstairs room contains a small library where books by David Toop, Dave Tompkins and Adam Harper sit alongside Schaeffer, Chion, Stockhausen and back issues of *Computer Music Journal*, as well as numerous writings and recordings from Sweden's own electronic pioneers such as Sten Hanson, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Jan W Morthenson and others.

As well as being available to local artists, EMS has an active international residency programme that means that at any one time all six of its studios will be occupied by composers, sound designers and sonic artists from Sweden and elsewhere. "I would say ten years ago, when I first came here, it was one guest composer a year; now we have over 50," Lindström tells me. "Today there are five local and three guest

composers, which is a normal day. We may have ten local and five guests during a day here. I saw a recording of the director in 1980, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, explaining the vision of EMS, and I realised that I am saying exactly the same things today: that we are not only working in a national context, we provide studios for any composers – not only targeting Swedish ones."

That night, in an almost too perfect demonstration of the institute's plurality and vitality at Under Bron – a house and techno club under a motorway flyover on the other side of Södermalm – Lindström improvises raw analogue noise from a flightcase of boxes and pedals while Spanish artist Alba G Corral projects rapidly proliferating visuals from her laptop, coding in real time. But while EMS is an organisation firmly rooted in the present, Lindström has found that there has been an upsurge of interest in its past, not only among researchers into electronic music history but also among more diverse audiences. The film clips he's showing me today are part of a talk about EMS's history recently given at Berlin's CTM festival, where he also presented Hungarian composer Ákos Rózmann's *Images Of The Dream And Death*, a monumental electroacoustic work partially composed at EMS in 1978, and recently issued as a triple LP by Stephen O'Malley's Ideologic Organ label. At one time, says Lindström, "it was almost impossible to perform Ákos Rózmann's music. Now, in the context of the CTM, I was amazed that there were 160 people in the audience."

It's safe to say that most electronic music festival organisers in 2014 would not be amazed by such a turnout. Electronic music's more remote archives continue to be brought to light and re-presented at a steady pace, both on record on imprints such as Ideologic Organ and, increasingly, in live settings, in clubs and bars over sound systems more used to dance music. The narratives around this often austere, abstract music at first seemed to coalesce around individual figures, frequently outliers, characterful and different by way of gender or nationality or special preoccupation – Rózmann, a sonically ambitious, devoutly religious East European in Scandinavia, is a perfect example. Perhaps inevitably, though, this narrative has extended to take in the studio environments in which electronic music was mostly realised until the 1990s. Schaeffer's GRM in Paris and Stockhausen's work at the Studio for Electronic Music at West German Radio in Cologne are well documented, their histories primarily based on the presence of those composers; but other, more obscure stories are being written, with books about the Philips research laboratory in the Netherlands and the Institute for Psychoacoustics and Electronic Music (IPEM) at Ghent University appearing in the last year. The latter's lavish illustrative material suggests that the appeal of the mid-century studio space is based on not just the sounds, but also the visual and social aura of such workplaces – work being an important word here, connecting with histories of design, technology and cultural politics.

No one has given EMS the coffee table book treatment yet, but the Stockholm organisation is a fascinating example of a studio as a site of collaborations and conflicts; of antagonisms and resolutions, as well as creation. Lacking one central figure around whom a theoretical school developed, it has instead been home to multiple visions of what

electronic music and sound should do, how it coexists 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 1950s, 60s and 70s. 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 Öyvind Fahlström (whose 1963 radio work *Birds Of Sweden* is an ur-text of Swedish experimentalism) and Åke Hodell 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; the *Semikolon*; series in 1965, we were not allowed to touch the equipment. It was the German style, you know, with the tonmeister [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 inherited 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 conceptions 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”, collages the sounds of shattering windows with calmly read news statistics and sharply cut fragments of speech; you can imagine it emanating from a radio set at the time, at once 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 seminars at EMS titled *Composing With Words*), it is clear that the concept of the voice, and its textural and timbral 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, with 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 in 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 1965 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.

“I myself wrote 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 organisations 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 electronic music studio was generally high, this

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