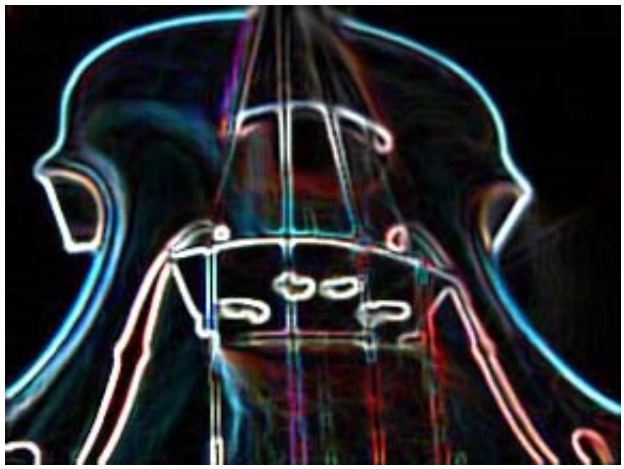
iFiddle Therefore I Am...
or is it "We Are...?"

http://www.americancomposers.org/chadabe_interview



Composer, writer, and music technologist Joel Chadabe recently sat down (in cyberspace) with composer Neil Rolnick and violinist Todd Reynolds to talk about their collaboration in the *iFiddle Concerto* being premiered March 17 & 18 as part of ACO's "Tech & Techno" concert.

Joel Chadabe: How do you feel about using technology in conjunction with a traditional instrument?

Todd Reynolds: For me, this whole notion of tradition points to the violin itself as a piece of technology. An instrument is a developing piece of technology, and today's technology is an outgrowth of earlier technology. The early violins, for example, had less tension on the strings because they were played in smaller spaces. So if I amplify my violin, it just turns into an evolved instrument, an outgrowth of an earlier violin, consistent with today's instruments and performance spaces. I haven't played an unamplified violin in a concert setting in years. And I haven't thought of the violin as anything but an instrument that contains amplification just like it contains strings.

Neil Rolnick: So it's really a silly question because the instrument that Todd plays is not an amplified instrument, it is just the instrument that Todd plays. And the amplification is simply part of it.

JC: Well, then, how does this technology-based instrument fit into the normal picture of a concerto for violin and orchestra?

NR: For me, this is not about technology per se. The electronics are transparent. It's about writing a concerto for a virtuoso with orchestra and the instrument the virtuoso plays is really what I'm writing for, and it happens to have unusual possibilities that are based in technology.

When I was talking with the ACO, they really liked the idea of writing a concerto for Todd. What I wanted to do was to find something that exploits Todd's virtuosity and musicality, which includes subtle and effects and capabilities that stem from the electronic aspects of his instrument. Some people use electronics just to make an instrument louder, or they put an

instrument through a guitar box, but for me, really trying to make something that is a tue virtuoso vehicle and that really exploits what can be done with Todd's instrument was exciting.

TR: We're also talking about traditional virtuosity. Neil's composition is a hybrid of tradition and new approaches. He is always looking for ways of getting new sounds, and the notion of integrating the use of electronics with a violin sound, such that it gets the same phrasing capabilities, was what he was aiming at.

NR: It's certainly what I was aiming at in the concerto. It's 20 minutes of melodies.

TR: And to amplify that without just making it louder was not easy.

JC: So what exactly did you do with Todd's violin?

NR: In putting together the piece, I integrated the sound and the music. From the first phrase of the piece, for example, where the violin starts with a series of repeated notes which quickly blossoms into an electronic cloud, the acoustic orchestra replies by imitating the electronic sound of the violin, so we have that traditional back and forth between soloist and ensemble. So the music played by the ensemble is influenced in a certain way by what the violin and computer do together, and at the same time the violin interacts with the orchestra. In the last few years, I've been really interested in the idea of using the computer in a way that is idiomatic to the computer, by which I mean doing with the computer what the computer does well. In this piece there are three different processing things that happen. There's a granulation of the violin sound that makes a cloud the fills the space, there's a kind of rhythmic delay and echoing that propels the rhythm forward, and there's the a wa-wa pedal effect hat makes for a kind of talking violin.

TR: With a traditional violin, you'd probably be surprised if it sounded like a trumpet, but with my violin, you hear the wa-wa like a normal sound that the instrument makes. It's a question of integrating the electronics, so that my violin makes sounds on its own like an expanded instrument.

JC: And how did you work together?

NR: After the score was done, Todd and I started talking about how we'll make this happen, and we talked about the goal of what we should do musically. The question was how do we make the violin part in a way that would make it played expressively. I want everyone to be able to see and hear that he is doing more than what an acoustic violin can do, but also that it sounds as musical. And I want people to be caught up in the piece.

TR: I don't like the idea of performing with a laptop and pushing buttons, so we designed an interface so I could have a physical relationship with the sound so that it would be very easy to see the connection between the physical gesture and the music. I'm using a simple device, a pedal, that is one of the principal parts of the instrument. It allows me to control the computer that changes the sounds that I'm making with the violin. I have a laptop on a table in front of me and I plug the violin into it so that the computer becomes part of the instrument. The sounds made by the violin become thematic in the musical vocabulary of the composition, and it's so accessible and clear that it makes musical sense. And it's what the whole piece is about. Everything I do is connected thematically to the concerto.

NR: One of the things that's really cool about our working relationship is that we can have a dialog about how to make the computerized aspects of the music more musical. We can talk about that because Todd really understands the complexity of the violin and computer together. We also talk about how the music can include melodic and rhythmic ideas and textures, and we can discuss how to integrate the interactive aspects of the music so that everything can grow out of the computerized transformations of the sound.

TR: This way of working together puts us in the same type of relationship that a composer and performer might have been in a long time ago. We can really have a very collaborative relationship. Some things never change.

- Joel Chadabe is a composer, performer, and a pioneer in the development of interactive music systems. He is President and Founder of the Electronic Music Foundation. A frequent writer about electronic music, Chadabe's book Electric Sound *(Prentice Hall, 1996) is the first comprehensive overview of electronic music. His articles have appeared in Computer Music Journal, Leonardo, Organised Sound, Electronic Musician, and numerous other journals, magazines, and anthologies.*