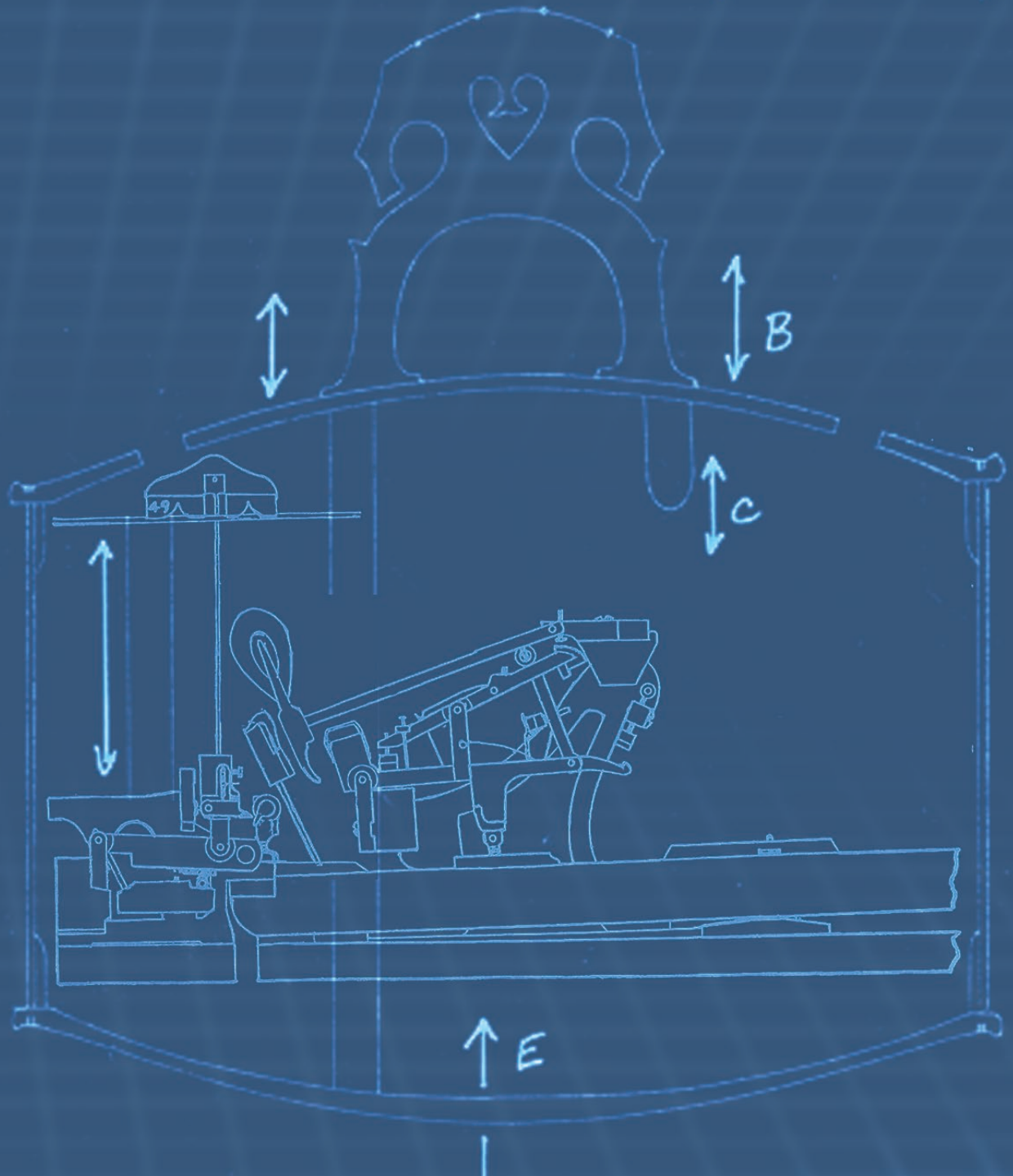
NEIL ROLNICK

EX MACHINA



NEIL ROLNICK

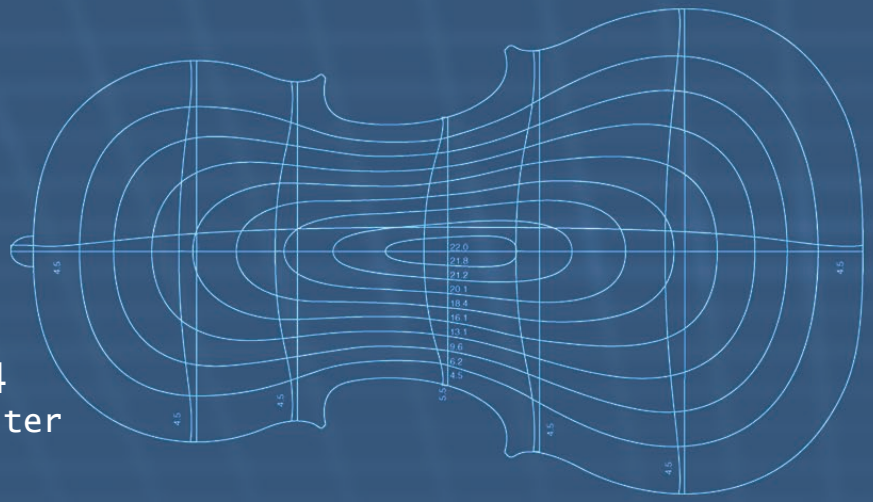
EX MACHINA

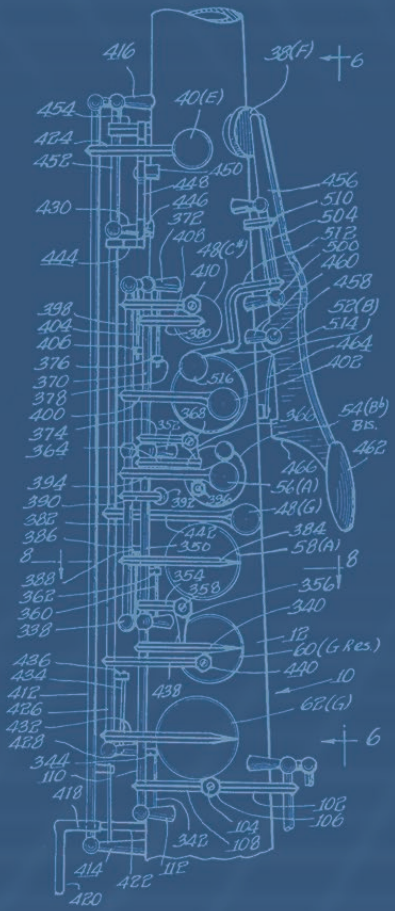
DISK ONE (63:31)

1. **Silicon Breath** (2014) 23:36
   Ted Nash, alto sax
   Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

2. **WakeUp** (2013) 11:49
   Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

3. **Cello Ex Machina** (2015) 28:04
   Ashley Bathgate, cello & laptop computer





DISK TWO (39:53)

1. **O Brother!** (2014) 9:38
   Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

2. **Dynamic RAM & Concert Grand** (2014) 30:13
   Kathleen Supové, piano
   Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

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I've been performing with computers for many years. When I play, the computer becomes a musical instrument for me. It drops its other functions (email and web interface, word processor, spreadsheet, sound, image and video editor) and becomes something which I can play and touch and tweak in various ways to realize the sounds I hear in my head. The two laptop pieces in this collection are my most recent solo efforts in this direction.

A lot of the music I write and perform, though, involves processing the sounds of other players in real time. I've always thought that, rather than me always playing the computer parts for these pieces, it might be interesting to integrate the control of the computer and the processing into the instrumental part. Just as it's commonplace for rock guitarists to control the quality of their sounds and audio effects with stomp boxes, it seems reasonable to expect that classical players can do something similar. The three instrumental pieces in this album are my most recent explorations of this idea.

As described overleaf, the pieces take varying approaches to how the player engages with the computer. All three pieces involve looping live materials and interacting improvisationally with digital effects. **Dynamic RAM & Concert Grand** asks the pianist to improvise with sounds she records in real time, and play with them in much the way I play with sounds in my solo pieces. And **Cello Ex Machina** actually takes the performance controls entirely out of my hands, and turns them over to the cellist. – N.R.

Ashley Bathgate www.ashleybathgate.com
Ted Nash www.tednash.com
Neil Rolnick www.neilrolnick.com
Kathleen Supové www.supove.com

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WakeUp contains elements from "Wake Up Little Susie" and "All I Have To Do Is Dream" performed by the Everly Brothers. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission. Under License from Barnaby Records, Inc. By arrangement with Ace Music Services, LLC.

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EMPAC (N.R.)

Recording Information:
Silicon Breath and *Cello Ex Machina* were recorded by Jody Elff
Dynamic RAM & Concert Grand was recorded by Ryan Streber at Oktaven Audio, Yonkers, NY.
WakeUp and *O Brother!* were recorded by Neil Rolnick.
All pieces mixed and mastered by Jody Elff.
Neil Rolnick, producer

Silicon Breath (2015)

Breath is what animates us. Without breath, a saxophone is just a bent metal tube and valves. Add breath, and it comes to life. In writing this piece, I had the image of the player's breath animating the computer as an extension of the horn. One way of thinking about **Silicon Breath** is as a catalog of ways the instrument and the computer can interact with each other: from building layers of loops, to complex canons, to using processing on accented notes to make a kind of counterpoint, to building chords which take their dynamic shape from the player's breath.

My New York neighbor **Ted Nash** is normally heard with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. He's got an international reputation as an incredible sax player, but had never worked with interactive electronics until he jumped into this project. He jumped with both feet, unintimidated by the technology, figuring out how to create and coordinate loops of his playing, and how to trigger various aspects of the computer processing with his articulations and dynamics. The virtuosity and musicality of his sax playing seemed to elevate and accelerate his integration of the technology.

While **Silicon Breath** is a piece for solo saxophone, the sound world it creates is multilayered and multi-textured in a way that is impossible for a solo horn. Yet all of the sound of the piece comes from the player's breath, on stage, in real time. There's nothing pre-recorded, and Ted is controlling much of how his playing is transformed by the computer.

Another way of thinking about **Silicon Breath** is as a story about us and computers. It's not much of a relationship if we think of the computer as an inanimate object

which we use to do mundane tasks. But if we breathe life into it, and take it on as a partner to expand the scope of what we can create and the breadth of our ability to express ourselves, then perhaps we get a whiff of silicon breath.

This piece was made possible by an Individual Artist Grant from the New York State Council On the Arts.

WakeUp (2013)
by Neil Rolnick and Felice & Boudleaux Bryant

Making new music out of old music is an old trick. It's abetted by new technology, and the ways in which digital access lets us move not just around the globe, but back in time. The Everly Brothers' recordings of the two songs which form the basis of this piece were on one of the first LPs I owned, when I was about 10 years old. It was a first glimpse into what I thought love would be: dreaming of a special girl, and the embarrassment of being "found out" by grown ups. Looking back, the songs have become iconic, carrying with them the more innocent, but not necessarily benign 1950s. Don & Phil's harmonies are still sweet, but they take on a different sound and different meaning after 60 years in our ears.

Cello Ex Machina (2015)

Writing this piece for **Ashley Bathgate**, cellist for the Bang On A Can All-Stars, was a unique and rewarding experience, not just because she's a spectacularly talented and accomplished cellist (which she is), but also because she is utterly unafraid of technology, eager to explore the possibilities it presents, and engaged enough to toil through crashes and malfunctions, in order to get to the musical heart of the piece.

Cello Ex Machina is the most recent of the pieces on this album. It was composed with the explicit goal of eventually making the piece something that Ashley can perform on her own, without me playing the computer. And this is, in fact, how she now performs the piece, playing the very demanding cello part while controlling the computer with pedals and with her articulations and dynamics on the cello.

This piece aspires to an orchestral sound world, with the depth and variety of sound you might expect from a large ensemble, not from a solo cello. There are layers of voices, contrasting timbres, and opportunities for the performer to play freely within the musical structures.

The title means: the cello emerging from the machine. But I don't think of it as describing a futuristic sci-fi world of machine-like automated cellos. Instead, I imagine a symbiotic world in which the cello motivates the machine to sing, the computer motivates the cello to expand its voice, and together they can construct sweet, expressive and complex musical worlds, different from what either can produce alone.

O Brother! (2014)

During my freshman and sophomore years in college, I spent most of my evenings playing various kinds of folk music at a communal house in Cambridge, MA called Old Joe Clark's. On trips back to my parents' home, I taught my younger brothers and my sister the music I was learning. In the nearly 50 years since, I've moved on to other kinds of musical pursuits, but my brother Peter has continued making this kind of American roots music a major part of his life. And he's gotten really good at it. When we get together, we usually play some of those old songs, but always in very traditional ways. I feel that I need to follow Peter's lead, since the kind of performance I usually do is pretty much outside his experience as a musician. But I've often wondered what it would be like if I took the lead in re-arranging some of these tunes. **O Brother!** is one answer. The voice is Peter's, the mashup is mine.

Dynamic RAM & Concert Grand (2014)

RAM: Random Access Memory. Dynamic RAM is the kind of small, cheap memory chip which makes up the memory in your computer.

So, on one level, the title of this piece simply says that it's focusing on the computer and the piano playing together. But perhaps more interestingly, it suggests that the computer and the piano are somehow co-equal as musical instruments.

The piano part is a virtuoso romp which demands a lot from the performer. The pianist needs to not only play lots of notes, but also to keep a strong sense of a groove going, often in the face of constantly changing meters and unanticipated sonic surroundings. The half-hour piece traverses a wide range of moods and styles, and there are transitional sections where the player uses musical materials from the rest of the piece to improvise, loop and process the music in performance.

Kathleen Supové has recorded all my works for piano, and we perform together often. Her flamboyant virtuosity and showmanship combine with a deep understanding of the music. Besides the kinds of interactions she's encountered in my previous works, this piece demands that she control the processing of her playing in improvisational sections, using a specially programmed iPad and foot pedals. She ended up engaging with this challenge with the same musicianship and spirit of adventure that I've come to expect in all our collaborations.

The computer may be co-equal, but it's different from the piano. Much of the computer's material comes from processing the piano in real time, creating rhythmic delays or granulated clouds of sound surrounding the piano. Other parts use the ability to record and play back loops of phrases. There are several sections in which the computer uses percussion loops to accompany the piano. But the computer doesn't try to imitate a percussionist. Instead, it makes use of the decision-making capabilities of the instrument and assembles combinations of beats in a quasi-random way which varies from one performance to the next, while processing and expanding on the percussion sounds in the same way as it does the piano sounds.

Making music is perhaps the most intimate, emotional and indescribable kind of artistic activity. On some level, making music with a digital machine seems to contradict that idea. But for me this piece represents an integration of the machine into the very soul of music making. It's not a piano piece with a computer track. It's chamber music in which we have to play together, listen together, make music together.

This piece was made possible by a grant from the Fromm Music Foundation.