

Studio Report

The Sonic Arts Lab at Peking University: A Working Report after Three Years of Experimentation

Blake STEVENS, Annie Yen-Ling LIU, John Han XU
Peking University, School of Arts

The Sonic Arts Lab at Peking University is a project founded in 2024 by two faculty members in historical musicology (Blake Stevens and Annie Yen-Ling Liu) and a postdoctoral fellow in musicology, sound studies, and composition, John Han Xu. The initial motivation of the lab was to create an informal and collaborative learning environment outside of the constraints of a large lecture course, modeled after the concept of a laptop orchestra. The lab, meeting variously on a weekly or semimonthly basis, was designed to complement lectures in the history of electronic and experimental music with practice-based exploration and creative modeling. In this sense, the lab created a space for ‘amateur composition’ corresponding to the types of modeling exercises in counterpoint and other techniques that have formed an integral part of music theory instruction in Western institutions for several centuries (see Stevens 2022). The significant difference for our lab is that our institution is a comprehensive research university without an undergraduate music major. Our students, representing a diverse set of majors, therefore could not be expected to have any shared musical background or technical knowledge, although many joined the lab because of their personal experimentation with and interest in music production using DAW software such as Ableton Live and GarageBand. While retaining the objective of accessibility through much of its activity, the lab has gradually expanded its goals through an increasing emphasis on research and even specialized areas, blurring this initially exclusive focus on the cultivation of ‘amateur’ sonic experimentation.

In this paper, we discuss several issues and challenges involving instruction in electronic music that have emerged through this experience. Our work in the lab has largely emphasized the importance of understanding the practitioner’s perspective within a diverse set of electronic music practices, including modular synthesis, field recording, acousmatic music (in the French tradition of *musique concrète*), Max/MSP, SuperCollider, Arduino (as control interfaces), telematic music performance, digital scores, AI-assisted audio-visual processing, information interaction, and sound installation. Our approach has been informed by Paolo de Assis’s advocacy for performance as an object not only of scholarly inquiry but as an experimental medium or site for research and the production of

new musical knowledge (de Assis 2018). We discuss several specific projects developed within this collaborative framework in light of the broader development of contemporary Chinese electronic music. In particular, we are interested in how an experimental space of sonic creativity can contribute to the musical experience of the ‘general education’ population within a research university, an underdeveloped area in the philosophy of education in electronic music. For instance, it quickly became apparent to us that within an experimental context, ‘non-music students’ could approach practices within electronic music such as acousmatic music and ambient music in unusual ways, often informed by their strengths in their ‘major’ disciplines. Because they have come from diverse academic backgrounds—including the visual arts, computer science, physics, and literature—these students are largely free from the constraints of traditional musical training. This lack of conventional ‘baggage’ has allowed them to approach composition and performance with fresh, often ‘outsider’ perspectives. Corresponding to this background, in addition to introducing the latest software, we have also guided students in hands-on experimentation with analogue equipment and hardware hacking to introduce pre-digital musical practices (see Collins 2019).

During spring semester of 2026, we transformed this ‘open’ and accessible approach into a more focused and specialized research project, collaborating with Professor Kenneth Fields of the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS) on his research into digital score generation and networked laptop performance at UCAS and the Central Conservatory of Music. This project builds upon a previous collaboration between Stanford University and Peking University in 2008 in which Prof. Fields participated (see Cáceres et al., 2008). Our group was comprised of students with coding or engineering backgrounds that allowed them to work with OSC signals, cameras, Kinect, Arduino and sensors, and to combine these tools with Max/MSP or SuperCollider in interactive performance. This project, in contrast to our earlier (and freer) exploration of a wide range of styles and techniques, was therefore oriented from the outset toward a final performance and a student-authored research article (Cao et al., 2026).

1. References

- Paulo de Assis (2018) *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance through Artistic Research*, Leuven, Belgium, Leuven University Press.
- Juan-Pablo Cáceres, Robert Hamilton, Deepak Iyer, Chris Chafe, and Ge Wang (2008) “To the Edge with China: Explorations in Network Performance”, *ARTECH 2008: Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Digital Arts*, Porto, Portugal, pp61–66.
- Kefan Cao, Baoxin Luo, Zuoqi Zhong, and John Han Xu (2026) “The Loss of Technical Control and the Return of the Human: Networked Musical Performance Based on Digital Scores”, *Chinese Arts* Vol.153 No.4, pp117–118.
- Nicolas Collins (2009) *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking*, 2nd ed, New York, Routledge.
- Blake Stevens (2022) “Introduction: Narrative Histories, ‘Real’ Music, and the Digital Vernacular,” in Blake Stevens (editor), *Teaching Electronic Music: Cultural, Creative, and Analytical Perspectives*, New York and London, Routledge, pp1–22.

2. Author’s Profile

Blake STEVENS

Blake Stevens is Associate Professor, researcher, Changjiang Chair Professor, and PhD Advisor in historical musicology in the School of Arts at Peking University (Beijing, China). His current research focuses on the history and aesthetics of experimental electronic music, with recent Chinese-language articles on phenomenology in the music of Alvin Lucier, electronic music and ecopoetics, and aurality and visibility in the theoretical writings of Pierre Schaeffer appearing in *Chinese Music*, *Huangzhong (Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music)*, and *Chinese Art*.

Annie Yen-Ling LIU

Annie Yen-Ling Liu is Associate Professor of Music History, researcher, and PhD Advisor at Peking University (Beijing, China). She is the author of *The World of Sound Itself: The Historicity of Pure Music and Sonic Ontology* (Peking University Press, forthcoming) and is currently the Regional Editor for East Asia for the journal *Organised Sound* (Cambridge University Press). Her research and teaching embraces music of both the Western and non-Western traditions, centering principally on German symphonic music from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, experimental music after 1950, and contemporary Chinese electroacoustic music.

John Han XU

John Han Xu is a composer, musicologist, sound artist, and post-doctoral researcher at Peking University (Beijing, China). His research focuses on contemporary music, sound studies, and the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of music in cross-cultural contexts. He has published recently on music as translation, the reception of contemporary Chinese composers, sound ecology, and the theoretical writings of Pierre Schaeffer in the *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, *Chinese Art*, and *Huangzhong (Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music)*.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.