



EDITORIAL

Hyperbole Followed By Disillusion

New technology is invariably preceded by hyperbole and followed by disillusionment. The short-term impact of new technology is generally overestimated, while the long-term impact is almost always underestimated," noted the chairman of AT&T in a recent interview. He was discussing the evolution of the much heralded "information superhighway," but his words could have just as easily been used to describe the evolution of the electronic music industry.

In one form or another, electronic musical instruments have existed for over 50 years, but from a commercial standpoint the synthesizer and electronic music market has been an important industry sales component only for the past 12 years. The only thing that has changed as rapidly as technology in that relatively brief time span has been the outlook of retailers and manufacturers. Initial euphoric expectations gave way to disappointment, which lately has been replaced by a more sustainable realism.

Underlying these wild mood swings is the immense difficulty in accurately forecasting the direction that a new technology will take. 1983, the year that Roland and Sequential Circuits provided the first working demonstration of the MIDI standard, was something of a watershed year. Enabling players to chain instruments from different makers together to create extraordinarily complex sounds and textures dramatically advanced the electronic market.

Shortly thereafter Casio and Yamaha jumped in and began selling millions of inexpensive portable keyboards equipped with MIDI ports, and a number of manufacturers and retailers sat back and waited for a "consumer MIDI" revolution as this immense block of new consumers traded up to more complex gear. According to the popular wisdom, electronic music was destined to become as popular as skateboards and softball. By 1986 we were regularly receiving business proposals from hopeful software companies that started with the premise, "There are eight million MIDI equipped keyboards in the U.S., and 32 million personal computers," and ended with the conclusion, "If just one percent of these users embrace our [fill in the blank: education, composition, musical entertainment, music arranging/performance, etc.] software to link their computer and keyboard, we will be a \$25 million business." Needless to say, the consumer MIDI revolution never panned out as predicted. While MIDI is now universally available on electronic instruments, only a relatively small group of serious players makes use of the standard, and the

challenge of broadening the use base is a difficult as ever.

What was not as widely predicted in 1983, but has become hugely significant, is the impact of electronics on the way music is being made and performed today. Guitars are currently in the forefront of popular music, but behind the scene arsenals of electronics, ranging from signal processing to tone modules, are employed to help produce that "true acoustic sound." The marriage between MIDI, the entire family of electronic instruments, and the computer has also made it possible for people working in their living rooms to create recordings that previously would have required a \$500,000 studio. Consumers may not have embraced electronic music to the extent predicted, but then no one anticipated that electronic music would end up on virtually every popular recording, including a lot of "unplugged" albums. And as desktop publishing has enhanced the quality of scores of periodicals, electronic music has unquestionably improved the quality of recorded and performed music.

Technology has currently made it possible to equip millions of personal computers with tone-generation technology. While the sounds are crude by current standards, it is worth remembering that the chip of preference is very similar to the FM sound chip that drove the legendary DX-7. Will this flood of computers with musical capabilities dramatically expand the market, or will it fizzle, much like the portable keyboard? In light of the perils of forecasting, we remain cautiously optimistic about the potential of this emerging market but somewhat fuzzy about the details. The educational and creative potential of the equipment is vast, but then getting a nation of 260 million people to understand and embrace a new idea can not be done overnight. So, short term, we don't expect miracles, but over the long term we feel that the nature of music and music making will continue to evolve, and new commercial opportunities will evolve.

Lest anyone think that the music industry is alone in the struggle to evaluate new technology, consider the following: In 1983 Bill Gates offered IBM a half interest in Microsoft for \$25 million. IBM, then riding high, declined. Today Microsoft has a market value of \$22 billion and is the dominant player in the personal computer industry. What a difference ten years can make in perspective.

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