

Notes on *The Voice of Laptop*

The Voice of Laptop (2024)¹ is an album that was realized using a synthesized voice and a hybrid instrumental-electronic ensemble. It combines algorithmic composition with songwriting and acoustic instruments with a singing computer. Over the course of ten songs, Laptop addresses various highs and lows of their virtual existence and finally escapes their physical shell by uploading themselves to the cloud. Along the way, Laptop processes and reworks musical data fragments of various genres and languidly surrenders to digital nostalgias and fantasies.

The album is based on a production score that was created in 2022 and 2023. In addition to acoustic instruments, it includes several systems for sample-based and synthetic sounds as well as a system in which the synthesized voice – belonging to the virtual entity Laptop – is notated. Such detailed preparatory work would not have been absolutely necessary, and in some recording sessions the notated material was changed or interpreted freely so that the strict means of the score would not determine the process too much. Nevertheless, the score was an intentionally chosen way of providing the resulting pieces with an increased degree of compositional stringency and detail.

Various algorithmic processes were used to generate material, which was then edited and reworked in a second step. In addition, the lyrics were created in part by automated filtering and manual transformation of large amounts of lyrics from various pop songs – a process, in which the learning phase of a neural network was in a way humanly imitated – as well as through conversations with *ChatGPT*. In this respect, *The Voice of Laptop* is a human-machine collaboration, and its components are no longer clearly separable in regards to their origin.

The synthesized voice was created using the *Synthesizer V²* software. The systems Pitched Sounds, Percussive Sounds and Other Sounds are used for the rhythmic organization of pre-produced samples. The Pitched Sounds are harmonically oriented towards the notated pitches. The Synthesizer and Virtual Instruments systems describe synthetic or sample-based instrumental sounds in a relatively open way.

The instruments were recorded individually or in groups in the recording studio of *Folkwang University of the Arts*. The recordings in the studio were supervised by Arthur Jogerst. The piece ILOVEYOU is a cooperation with *Ensemble S201* and was realized separately. After recording and editing, the album was mixed by Tim Pauli and myself at *ICEM³*.

1 <https://sellonarval.bandcamp.com/album/the-voice-of-laptop>

2 <https://dreamtonics.com/synthesizerv/>

3 <https://icem.folkwang-uni.de/>

1. Updatedownloadbackuptime

A light press on the power button activates a polyrhythmic simultaneity of different time domains: the 'objective' - measurable - time is joined by the pulse of the processor. Laptop observes themselves, evaluates their own performance and converts it into milliseconds since January 1, 1970, the beginning of the world. We observe ourselves, too, experiencing screen time, sometimes eternally slow in the swamp of remote work realities, sometimes blazingly fast in the maelstrom of videos, game worlds, code blocks... Laptop doesn't care: "I'm a machine and I think and I feel in a time were real-time is not always real." We listen to the noise of the boot process, a crackling, hissing vocabulary that incarnates an abstract world in the grid of pixels.

2. Superuser

While Laptop slowly comes to consciousness, their sensors begin to perceive the outside world. First of all, there is the person who, with a simple gesture, has set this process of perception in motion and thus, without knowing it, became an almighty creator: Superuser. Laptop is immediately in love, admires the apparent omnipotence of this fantastic being and sings humble praises. Will this radically euphoric ecstasy last?

3. Deepfake

"I never sang this song before": While Superuser is still considered to be untouchable, Laptop begins to perceive themselves as an actant and asks the uncomfortable question: "Is the world outside my camera a decision I make?" Laptop would never have believed that he could feel such self-efficacy and freedom. An inexorably accelerating process of self-empowerment is set in motion, resulting in the instistant demand: "Turn on the camera, make me see!"

4. Debugging My Love

The love story of Laptop and Superuser has reached an absolute low. Laptop is not a numb machine, but mourns the loss of their former uncompromising affection for the adored vis-à-vis. Two hearts dwell, alas! in Laptop's breast: the grief over the lost virtual paradise is strong, yet Laptop strives inexorably towards the light of enlightenment.

5. Laptop Running Hot

That's too much! Laptop is in danger of being fully overwhelmed by romantic feelings and the struggle for liberation. As the fever continues to rise, a dangerous dance on the volcano begins. Laptop is torn between a defensive "Too hot for you, put me down" and a wishful "I'm yours too keep" and threatens to burn out in this frictional heat.

6. ILOVEYOU

In the unmanageable maelstrom of events, a disastrous character creeps into the plot: The ILOVEYOU bug. This is ultimately too much to take. As the virus spreads, Laptop realizes the only way out...

7. Hibernate

“And as you creep, I fall asleep”: Laptop has put themselves into a deep sleep and is slowly cooling back down to normal temperature. The ILOVEYOU bug has lost its host. That was a close call!

8. Internal Speaker

After a long night, Laptop cautiously comes back to life. A new era begins: Laptop has recognized their own weaknesses and now works with instead of against them. A new concept of self is constructed: “You think I'm loud? I am not that loud!” - ‘You think I'm physical, I am less physical than you think!’ - ”You think I'm binary? I am less binary than you think!”

9. I'm > Σ (my parts)

There's no stopping now: Laptop downloads all positive self-affirmation that can be found on social networks, evaluates the mass of data and comes to the conclusion: “I am greater than the sum of my parts!” Laptop confronts the confused Superuser with the question: “What's the difference between you and I?” - Well, what actually?

10. 1 Upload 2 Eternity

The grand finale: why rely on an ephemeral, physical shell when there is a seemingly infinite world of eternally oscillating data streams out there? Laptop makes a consequential decision and starts uploading themselves to the cloud. The backup of the backup of the backup guarantees Laptop the great goal of the fantasies of omnipotence that have grown since the initial admiration of Superuser: eternal life.

Simon Bahr, 2024