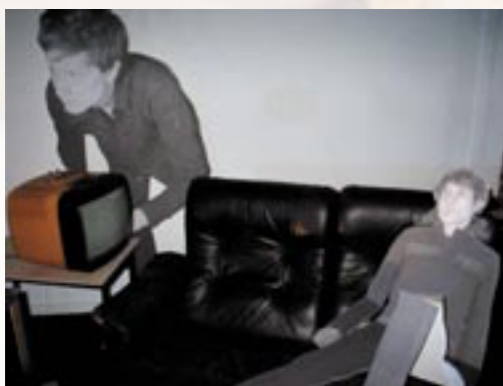


secret sonic weapons

After four decades at the front line of the international electronic music scene, STEIM continues to produce new instruments that wring sounds from everything from hand gestures to basketballs.



Today, thanks to advancements in computer technology, anyone can create electronic music at home. But this doesn't mean the Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music (STEIM) has lost its purpose. After 40 years, it's still surprising its audience by developing unusual instruments and music in cooperation with a diverse range of artists from all over the world.

The Crackle Box, the Sonic Chair, the Bebop Table, the Mesh Box, the Animal Symphony Web and the Electronic Baby Mirror – these are just a few of the strange and sensational sonic devices developed at STEIM. Far from being just a gadget factory, though, the centre mainly aims to make technology that's human-friendly, and to enliven the performance of electronic music.

"I see the Dutch as inventors," says artistic director Jan St Werner, one of the newest members of the STEIM community. His reputation as founder of the quirky German techno group Mouse on Mars and the influential Cologne record label Sonig won him an invitation to head the internationally renowned institution. "Since I've been here, I've seen people from Dutch art and music academies bringing in very weird tools, sounds and philosophies," says St Werner.

'The collection has since grown to include more than 1,500 works'

"Also, these places have people from all over the world, and that's a big advantage. I see the Amsterdam art scene as good at bringing really different cultures and scenes together."

Each year STEIM lets around 120 people use its studio facilities to develop their own projects. These can be new compositions, innovative instruments or novel ways of performing electronic music. Increasing numbers of applicants come from other artistic fields, such as theatre, dance or visual art.

As St Werner gives a tour of the STEIM building, he emphasises the importance of the research and development department, which supports the resident artists. There, he points out computers on which the main software, LiSa (short for Live Sampling), is

maintained, and an anonymous-looking circuit board, which he identifies as the JunXion box.

"LiSa can sample sounds and edit them in real time," says St Werner. "With the JunXion box you can connect all kinds of controllers to LiSa, from joysticks and keyboards to the most futuristic devices. It can basically read data from anything, even a hair dryer or your sports shoe, and translate it into electronic language to control the sound."

With STEIM's technical tools, artists can make a multimedia performance out of anything – say, a game of wheelchair basketball. The laboratory's technical wizard, Jorgen Brinkman, picks up a small yellow basketball to illustrate: equipped with accelerometers, it will be used in a performance by musician Jon Rose and a group of disabled people.

Talking about the infinite possibilities of electronic media, Jan St Werner paraphrases the jazz musician Sun Ra, who contended that we are all instruments and everyone has a role to play in the great orchestra of the intergalactic cosmos. "If you had good controllers, you could just use your aesthetic and cognitive perception to create music, without even doing anything," St Werner muses.

One of the pioneers in bringing advanced technology closer to the human sensory system is STEIM's longtime director Michel Waisvisz, who created instruments like The Hands and The Web. The Hands is basically a pair of devices that attach to the human hands and use basic gestures to activate sounds. The Web is a set of interconnected wires that can be adjusted and plucked.

Waisvisz regularly performs on stage with his instruments. He also develops new variations on these basic devices. Audience members can try them and other artist-invented instruments at events like the Electro Squeek Club and the Touch exhibition, which are held with irregular frequency in STEIM's building off the Utrechtsestraat

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