

Title: Introduction

Subtitle: Instruments, users, and creators: Distributed agencies in contemporary electronic lutherie

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This issue collects work from and responding to the "Electronic Lutherie" symposium held at Orpheus Institute in January 2026 and co-convened with Catalyst Institute for Arts and Technology Berlin—an event organized around three central questions: how do instrument designers understand the creative potentials of their work, how explicitly are their intentions reflected in what they create, and what agencies and autonomies emerge when musicians actually play these tools?

Richard Scott's essay on **sonic plausibility** provides a theoretical anchor. Drawing on decades of work with synthesizer designer Rob Hordijk, Scott develops a framework for understanding electronic sound as existing in an ambiguous space between representation and abstraction. A plausible sound is one that *could* exist—not necessarily reproducing known acoustic reality, but creating coherent imaginative worlds whose meanings depend on the active engagement of listeners and performers. This concept proves remarkably generative: it captures how instruments are designed with aesthetic intention, discovered and reinvented in practice, and how meaning emerges through dialogue between maker and user.

Suzanne Ciani's groundbreaking **1976 performance manual** (Collard & Parra Cancino) embodies this dialogue perfectly. Written as a grant report on her live Buchla practice, Ciani's field notes on techniques like the "Vertical Sequencer" and "Melodic-Rhythmic Reliefs" remain a vital instruction manual for how to negotiate creative agency within an instrument designed for both composition and improvisation. Fifty years later, the document reveals that an instrument's creative potentials are continuously revealed through practice—they are not fixed properties waiting to be unlocked, but continuously reshaped by those who engage with them seriously.

The contributions that follow unfold this negotiation from multiple directions. **Archival and historical recovery** (Teboul on Mumma's *Mesa*) reveal how live electronic works resist stable documentation, requiring reverse-engineering, oral history, and creative reinvention. **Design intention becomes visible in practice** through artists describing how instrument architecture enables or constrains possibility—reimagining historical instruments as children's play (Blackmore), tracing compositional intention embedded in design (Boccio), or documenting how established performers negotiate between affordance and discovery (Matthews, Mersch, Sappho, Collins).

Spatial, material, and technical innovation constitute another crucial axis. These range from systems capturing three-dimensional sound objects in virtual space (Druez) or electromagnetic string actuation (Fusi & McLaughlin), to work literally embedding earth within eurorack modules and asking what it means to ground electronics in ecological origins (Howse), to investigations of how feedback systems enable what Bertoni calls a "post-instrumental identity"—where performer and instrument negotiate rather than master each other. Documentation of performance practice with modular synthesis and feedback systems (Ramírez-Agámez, Ha), examinations of media specificity in instrument design (Choi), historical and contemporary accounts of acoustic synthesis (Linder Miñambres), and explorations of vocal and instrumental sound dance (Nowitz) round out this constellation of approaches.

What emerges across these diverse investigations is a shared recognition: electronic lutherie is fundamentally about negotiation between what designers intend and what users discover, between control and emergence, between historical precedent and present reinvention. No instrument fully determines its creative potentials; those potentials are continuously revealed through engagement. Designers embed aesthetic choices into circuitry and architecture; performers and composers then discover, adapt, and radically reimagine what those choices enable. An instrument remains a proposition—a set of possibilities structured by deliberate design—but the actual potentials that emerge depend on who plays it, when, with what imagination, and in response to what circumstances. It is precisely this ongoing negotiation between intention and reinvention that keeps electronic lutherie vital, surprising, and creatively generative.