

David Wessel Remembered



After the sad news of David Wessel's death at the end of 2014, John Chowning collected the following tributes from David's friends, colleagues and former students. Array is pleased to be able to publish a selection here (with special thanks to Chrissy Nanou).

John Chowning

In my first years of teaching at Stanford University, I was listed as faculty in percussion in addition to computer music and theory. I was approached in 1966 by a graduate student in Psychology who asked me to give him percussion lessons and

thus began a friendship with David Wessel that continued until his sudden death on Oct 13, 2014. In fact, he was already an accomplished jazz drummer, but he wanted to work on new music repertoire—reading and performing. I was intensely interested in what he knew about perception and he was equally interested in the work that I was pursuing in computer music. He saw immediately the vast research and musical potential of Max Mathews' application of the sampling theorem to music. It became the seed from which most of his work sprouted because it allowed the manipulation and study of sound in a new way - and even David's most abstract ideas and creations were never far from sound!

It is not easy to write about someone who has been such a close friend and colleague for so many years. Writing thoughts and feelings about David seems to stop him in place, when his personality and ideas were always evolving — in motion. I am also aware that my knowledge of David is bounded by my own limitations; there is much of David's work that is beyond my capacity to know. And so I asked colleagues and friends to write a few sentences regarding David, whether as artist, teacher, colleague, friend — whatever. Thus, we find solace in reading these tributes. We see how his ideas sprout ideas that continue to evolve — in motion — through generations!

David was remarkable and so are those who worked with him — and that is not by chance, I believe.

Jean-Claude Risset

David Wessel has been a most inspired and inspiring figure in computer music. His inventiveness, his insight, his imagination, his curiosity, his dedication, his communicative enthusiasm, his generosity, his warmth have been great assets to the development of computer music. His numberless contributions were of great importance for musical creation, performance and theory. His speculative ideas were potent and audacious, well organized and clearly formulated. His bold visions were always practical. He was instrumental in establishing standards helping to share musical data and to make the development of computer music resources a collective endeavor.

David contributed to make the notion of timbral space familiar and useful. As a performing musician with deep skills in mathematics and psychology, he developed methods to establish personalized timbre maps permitting predictions about the combination of sounds. Such maps provided navigational help for musicians interested in exploring the continuum of timbre.

David was like a beacon. Many musicians, scientists, and students were set in motion

by David's flow of suggestions. David played an extremely useful role in IRCAM in the 1970s and 1980s, and he created and developed CNMAT, a most original and active institution for musical research and creation. I always enjoyed working with David, and I am personally deeply grateful for his help and his incentive proposals. His death is a great loss for the community, but he leaves a path to continue and an example to follow.

Roger Reynolds

We encounter, in the course of our lives, many people. But also few. Some categories of people have only one occupant. David Wessel was one of those. He had a singular ability to catalyze creative awareness and growth, whatever the circumstances. His capaciousness of mind was disconcerting. I encountered him at Ircam in the early 1980s. He seemed almost magical, a migratory bird, a stork of the intellect who delivered bundles of useful insight and perspective both inevitably, and inexhaustibly. It was like this: the geometry of Ircam involves several levels of offices and studios. Different (often very) individual researchers and teams inhabit these spaces. David followed a meandering path through the facility that resulted, for the occupants of each space, in unexpected visits. One day he would appear. He wanted to know what you were up to, what difficulties you might be

having, what discoveries were emergent. He was a gifted listener in that he grasped quickly what the center of the situation was – whether all was well or whether components in the mix needed to be realigned in some way so as to become more productive. He gave away insights, references, parallels, enabling connectivities and proposals for action in a prodigious way. Then – suddenly realizing that something else called he would exclaim (it always seemed genuine) “I’ll be right back!”, upon which he would exit the space and continue his unknowable route through ‘the house’. His return could easily be weeks later, but he would pick the discussion up where it had been left as though it had only been a few minutes. Anyone who knew David could tell story after story of ways in which his zest for life, for ideas, for experience, and for the tenderly caramelized pleasures of food and drink and companionship was made manifest for them. (I remember the perilous elasticity of the ancient floors in his Rue Quincampoix apartment, and the delicious experience of enduring Syberberg’s 5-hour Parsifal with him.) David made not one but many impacts on my life for which I will be always and deeply grateful. His accomplishments as a person and as an actor in this pageant of life we inhabit are to be admired and remembered for themselves but also because of the generosity of mind and spirit that they displayed. Always.

François Bayle

David Wessel, with his lucid and generous sensitivity: an emeritus figure of our beautiful musical history!

Vijay Iyer

Today my dear friend and mentor, Professor David Wessel of University of California, Berkeley, passed away very suddenly.

It’s difficult to convey the impact this man had on my life. Twenty years ago I was in a confused spiral out of a physics PhD program, and he found me, took me under his wing, calmed me down and helped me study music on my own terms, in the special place that he founded -- the Center for New Music and Audio Technologies (CNMAT).

I spent those next four years in constant contact with him. He taught me about the ear, the brain, the body, pitch, timbre, rhythm, improvisation, perception and cognition, mathematics, computation, neuroscience, signal processing, statistics, and psychology. Through him I met George Lewis, Roscoe Mitchell, Jonathan Harvey, Oliver Johnson, J.D. Parran, Erv Hafter, Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy, David Zicarelli, Salamat Ali Khan, and dozens of other amazing folks. I programmed in Max, witnessed the beginnings of MSP, and learned about electroacoustic music. I gave my first

conference talks, saw my first academic publications, and wrote a dissertation under his guidance.



We also made music together: me on piano, and David on his interface of choice -- a keyboard connected to a sampler, or the Buchla Thunder, or finally his own Slabs (shown above) -- along with computers that fit in two suitcases and later in one backpack, running programs he created that implemented ideas he developed. Inspired by the creative music movement and by experimental psychology, he was a totally original artist who thought for himself.

A true leader, teacher, and friend, David Wessel left an immeasurably huge legacy of ideas. He changed dozens if not hundreds of lives. He will always be a guiding force in my life and work.

So long, David. I don’t know where I would be right now if you hadn’t intervened at that moment in 1994, but I know that this was the better path by far.

Chris Chafe

This might not be well known. In addition to everything David and I did together (mentor, boss of the best kind, colleague, musical partner, advisor) he had a campus radio show in Michigan when I was a college student living in the same town. The music was the finest selection of new work from all over the world with a special focus on Chicago and his colleagues in improvised music. It was awe-inspiring and life-changing.

Adrian Freed

David certainly did exactly as Jean-Claude Risset described at IRCAM then, and it was a pleasure to help him in that endeavor by using the awkward opportunity of replacing the PDP10 with the UNIX system. One of my first memos as Responsable du Service Informatique was sent to the entire staff. I introduced the new system and mentioned that everyone’s desk would have a terminal on it so we could e-mail each other and use the system for word processing, music production and scientific research and analysis. This caused an uproar from the factions who thought the system should be for them exclusively. Boulez called a plenary meeting to sort it out, listened carefully to everyone’s concerns and posturing, and then simply declared that everyone should cooperate with my

proposal. I had never seen such power wielded so quietly before - the efficiency of a mostly benevolent dictatorship. Underwriting the promise was hard work, but the resources kept appearing to do it - another staff member, consultants from the US etc. David was behind that.

David loved this environment of 'rolling up the sleeves' to move things forward and made it easy for me to forge friendships and collaborations with Bennett Smith, Steve MacAdams, Xavier Rodet and so many others.

These last days I have been called very much to the present and future - helping David's family and the CNMAT family through this difficult time.

Thanks for bringing me to think back to those early days with David - the beginning for me of a fabulous ride on that magic carpet he made for us to fly on.

Fred Lerdahl

David and I became acquainted in the early 1980s, first at a music-brain conference in Ossiach, Austria, and then during residencies that I had at Ircam. He was a living library of information in experimental psychology, music perception, and computer music. His brain was the ultimate parallel processor. When he had an abstracted air, as he often did, it was because he was juggling five trains of thought at once. He also

exuded personal magic, a reflection of his boundless enthusiasm and generosity of spirit. Exchanging ideas with him was always exciting.

At Ircam he was my first and most important instructor in psychoacoustics and computational thinking. He helped guide my attempts to adapt the theoretical constructions in *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (at the time not yet published) as a computer aid to composition. A few years later, inspired by his pioneering work on timbral spaces and by our many conversations about the role of timbre in contemporary composition, I explored the proposition that timbre could be organized hierarchically. This project, though only a qualified success, proved to be fruitful in a larger sense, for it set me on the path toward a far more successful model of pitch space. Thus much of my work in music theory and cognition is indebted to conversations with David. This is typical of him: all his life, out of his vast knowledge and imagination, he sparked ideas in students and colleagues, ideas that changed their careers.

After the Ircam years we saw each other intermittently. But in 2011, while I was the visiting Bloch professor at UC/Berkeley, we resumed our conversations in earnest and devoted several sessions of my graduate seminar, which he regularly attended, to issues of timbral organization. It is unspeakably sad to

realize that the conversations are over. I will remember him above all, beyond his intellectual brilliance, for his personal kindness.

Mark Applebaum

I think that this tribute could even invite some mention of his passion for the culinary arts, particularly molecular gastronomy and other super fussy, meticulous, assiduous approaches involving subtle techniques and esoteric apparatuses for making delicate foams and the like. David so often had a twinkle in his eye. But it was particularly bright when he discussed his latest culinary obsession. I always inferred that the acumen he demonstrated in the musical lab as a creative thinker, researcher, and artist—brilliant, insightful, and often with a twinge of 'naughty nerd'—was applied in parallel service of his foodie fetish. It struck me as a kind of portable genius personality trait.

(On another food note: I once had dinner with David and Matt Wright at a restaurant near IRCAM; midway through the meal he looked around and, as if having a flashback, noted 'I had dinner here once with Karlheinz Stockhausen.') More generally, the quality that I so appreciated was his kindness and support. He was such an important mentor for so many people—both formal students and everyone else who came in

contact with him. That was an important 'competence' that, particularly for the community he touched, is equal to his impressively broad 'disciplinary' legacy.

Aaron Einbond

When I was a young graduate student at CNMAT in Berkeley, in one of his seminars generously overflowing with ideas, David said, paraphrasing Paul Klee, that he wanted to 'take a walk in timbre space'. All of my own composition and research since then has been inspired by this idea. But it was his way of life as well: moving in a multi-dimensional space, always curious, crossing borders and categories, sharing knowledge and joy with everyone along the way.