

Excursion to the Ars Electronica Center

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1. Intro

The Ars Electronica Center (AEC) in Linz advertises to address topics that “range from artificial intelligence and neuro-bionics to autonomous systems and robotics, genetic engineering and biotechnology, as well as the profound global changes of our time”¹. Among those topics, on the top floor of the AEC, there was a music-focused exhibition titled “AIXMusic”. This already brings me to my discussion about a certain part of this exhibition space.

2. Musical History, Written by Technologists

After you arrive at the top floor, either by elevator or the stairs, you won’t instantly spot the musical history wall that was the focus of my attention, even though it stretches at least 4 meters in length. On this wall that’s located in the main space², there are many small wood panels with either text or pictures that go along with the text, housing different topics on music. These topics are aligned from left to right in a chronologically ascending manner. From the headings and starting date of the chronology, it is instantly clear that this piece isn’t about the general timeline of music; it’s about its technological strides and its way towards digital technology and the further expansion of these ideas into the future.

On the website of the exhibition, there is a listing of the exhibits, where the wall itself isn’t even mentioned, just a part of it: the Modular Synthesizer. To embed this into such a wall, especially in the spot where it belongs in the chronology, makes a lot of sense. But that this part of the AIXMusic exhibition isn’t mentioned as its own part is underwhelming. Of course the other pieces paint a more vivid picture of music and technological innovation often being intertwined, as e.g. the organ was one of the most complex machines of its time which is in small demonstrated by “The Instrument That Plays by Itself – New Interpretation” exhibition as well as the “Flute Organ”, but the historical information panels offer insight into the lineage and propagation of concepts, e.g. aleatoric music, into new eras – from Ockeghem in the 15th century to Cage in the 50s. Personally, I picked this piece because I am a computer musician who is also very aware of its history through my bachelor’s studies. While the AEC wouldn’t acknowledge the importance of this part of the AIXMusic exhibition, I see big value in its chronological order and the bite sized presentation.

As a sidenote, because I think this should be the standard in such historical overviews: the acknowledgement of women’s very important contributions to the history (of which some in the exhibition include: Ada Lovelace, who is portrayed as an innovator in her own right, distinct from Charles Babbage; Laurie Anderson; Éliane Ragigue (R.I.P.); Suzanne Ciani; Daphne Oram; Else Marie Pade; Johanna Magdalena Beyer; Mary Ellen Bute) of music technology is refreshing, and just more accurate than what many histories of inventions have tried to teach us.

¹[Ars Electronica Center Website](#)

²which is expanded upon by two shut of spaces that house exhibition pieces showcasing on one side a Yamaha reproducing piano that serves as the audio input for a reactive A.I. live generated visual, and on the other side a computer room showcasing different approaches of making music with computers, as well as a theremin

3. Conclusion

As a computer musician myself, seeing this wall was like looking at a family tree. Something one can understand and follow by stories other members of the family have told them – but also something that inspires awe in the long history it has taken to arrive at this point. It humbles one and also inspires one to be as inventive, innovative, and courageous as them.