

# Hendrix From Heaven

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Trimpin: a legend for inventing machines to play all kinds of instruments

*photo: Charles Peterson*

I had business in Seattle recently, so I visited Trimpin, the German American composer-engineer who last year won the most well-deserved MacArthur "genius" award I know of. His studio was stacked with electric guitars, about 50 of them. Among other things, Trimpin is a legend for having invented machines to play all kinds of instruments—xylophones, cellos, bass clarinets—via MIDI, responding to detailed computer demands to execute humanly impossible rhythms and timbres. So far in his career, though, he's used only acoustic sounds. Now, he's got a commission to create a tower of electric guitars for Seattle's upcoming Experience Music Project, a new museum/entertainment center designed by famous architect Frank Gehry and lavishly bankrolled by Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen.

The EMP is generally a celebration of rock, and more specifically of Seattle native Jimi Hendrix. And so Trimpin is awash in electric guitars, many of them donated by Guitar World. The reduced prototype of his 35-foot-high installation stands in the middle of the studio: a curved cylinder, flaring wider at the top, like a tornado, from which 650 guitars will eventually hang. Some of the guitars will just be for looks, others will have their strings struck and strummed percussively in precisely synchronized rhythms snaking around the tornado. Most interesting, though, are the

one-string guitars Trimpin is building that will play his Hendrix-inspired music via computer.

These guitars have mechanical fingers, triggered by solenoids, along the frets (eventually, for less commercial projects, he wants to jettison the frets to allow microtonal tunings). At the bottom of each string is a metal cylinder with two plucking devices on it: a rubber one that makes the string sound as if plucked by a finger and a plastic one that sounds like a pick. I play a few notes on a cheap little MIDI keyboard sitting on the computer stand, and the guitar strings behind me instantly plink in response—I'm plucking guitars by remote control. And Trimpin will be able to reprogram new pieces as he writes them, adding distortion, wa-wa pedal, and other effects to suggest different phases in rock history.

When Trimpin first proposed the design, the honchos wanted to know who was going to climb that tornado and tune all those guitars. But Trimpin, with his typical all-seeing engineer's vision, had already anticipated them. At the bottom of each guitar is a tuning sensor. The computer self-tests, and if the string goes more than a couple of cents flat, the tuning sensor will activate a screw that will slightly extend the movable top of the guitar's neck, stretching out the string until it is again perfectly in tune—a self-tuning guitar.

Wandering around Trimpin's studio, you find a Dr. Seuss world of fabulous musical instruments: xylophones drooping across balconies like Dali's clocks, raucous bouquets of trumpet and trombone bells, fire organs that play pitched pipes via Bunsen burners. Among them all, I find a cache of vinyl records by Liberace and Ferrante and Teicher. Those, Trimpin explains, are for his next project, an installation of computer-controlled turntables. The computer will begin playing 10 copies of the same disc exactly in sync, then some will speed up slightly, others will slow down. At various times, all the turntables will reverse direction, exactly in sync, or else in canonic rhythmic patterns. With one step, he's taking the evolution of DJ-ing into the 22nd century, decades early. And if you're going to trash somebody's recording, Trimpin muses, who better than Liberace?

With anyone else, I'd be skeptical that the final results would live up to their description, but I've already seen Trimpin's art laugh at physical limitations. At dinner I expressed my frustration with the tuning of conventional pianos. He took a napkin and drew for me the mechanism needed to allow each string on a piano to be individually retunable via computer during a performance. Problem is, the tuners needed for each string are \$800 each, so this and the extraordinary tension on piano strings sends the price of a self-retuning piano into the hundreds-of-thousands-of-dollars range. But hordes of dot-comers across the Sound in Bellevue have that kind of cash to throw around, and I suspect Trimpin will make even this impossible dream a reality someday. Meanwhile, his guitar tower opens June 23 and is bound to be one of the country's most remarkable works of public art.



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