THE MUSICIAN'S RESOURCE

PERFORMER

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Noted electronic musician Daedelus is among the Berklee faculty members participating in this year's summit

SPECIAL INTERVIEW with Michael Bierylo, chair of the Berklee Electronic Production and Design Department

We recently chatted with Berklee's Michael Bierylo (noted electronic musician, guitarist, composer, and sound designer who also runs the Connect: EDI Summit on electronic music at Berklee's Boston campus) about home recording and how the summit connects today's young music makers.

Let's dive in...

Hi Michael, I know Jake Wu from Donner put us together because we're working on a home recording guide slash special issue, and he thought it'd be a good opportunity for us to talk to you about the work that you're doing, not only at Berklee and with the summit, but maybe offering some tips to musicians out there, especially those in the electronic production world who are looking to record their own music or set up their own recording rigs.

Great. Totally happy to help.

Would you fill us in a bit on your background? Both at Berklee, obviously, and in the electronic music world?

So right now I'm currently the chair of the Electronic Production Design department at Berklee. We're really focused on electronic music production, but we do a lot of other things. That part the department started in the 80s as the Music Synthesis Department. So our roots really are on sound synthesis, and a lot of electronic music making is from the perspective of sound design synthesizer software, instruments, DSP's -- things like that as opposed to recording bands.

Over time that's kind of morphed into the whole idea of people doing self-production with electronic music really being the dominant paradigm for people putting together their musical ideas these days. One of the things that we do in the department at Berklee, there's a core course that everybody takes that gets them up and

running with producing music. We feel that if you're at Berklee doing music, you have to be able to produce your musical ideas effectively. So it's kind of like, you know, if you went to Harvard and you didn't know how to type, it would be pretty [out of place] in this day and age.

We're pretty deeply embedded and working with all sorts of musicians across the college, helping them develop self-production skills, and some of them even go on to majors like MP and E, where they really are honing in on a career as a recording engineer. Songwriters now are producing pretty heavily, as well. So a lot of this really crosses over [across majors].

That makes sense.

I've been at Berklee for 28 years and in the Boston scene since I left college; one of my main modes of performance is using modular synthesizers, and so I've been doing performances all around and this fall, I'll be taking a couple months to travel around the country doing various gigs. Just performing as a modular synthesizer player...

It's interesting you bring that up because the modular thing is kind of in full swing right now -- I don't think modular components have ever been as popular as they are today, maybe even when you started back at Berklee, you know, 20 plus years ago. I would imagine it was probably more hardware-based synthesis then. Can you talk to that at all? I'm wondering why the explosion...

You're absolutely right, you know? In the 90s, we were really focusing on hardware and in the early 2000s when computers started getting fast enough to reliably run software instruments, things kind of switched over to that world. I got into it and I had a sabbatical in 2010 and I lived in Berlin for a while, and my sabbatical project was to go into research how people were using laptops to perform music.

And so when I got there, I met a bunch of people in Berlin, in fact many of the same people who worked at Native Instruments. And they said, Oh, we did all that, you know, 10 years ago. And I said, well, what's going on now? Well, people are back getting back to hardware. And so when I was in Berlin, I really started investigating modular instruments. When I returned, I put together my first modular system. So I think the thing with modulars, there's a couple different kind of ways of thinking about this...

We in our program, all of our students start out learning about synthesis on Eurorack modular system and what we've seen is that for a generation of people who have learned to work with synthesizers on a computer, the idea of actually touching something and wiring it together and patching it together...is really interesting.

It's a different modality and people are really kind of interested in that. The other part of it is it really is a completely open system and people can explore and get lost and come up with sounds and pathways either on purpose or by accident. Things they wouldn't have come up with in other ways, and there's a certain kind of joy to just handling these instruments.

That's one of the things I like about it.

So you know, the idea that it's ephemeral, you create something and have this really cool sound and you know that you'll never get it again. There's a certain magic involved in that that you don't quite get when you're working with Serum.

Yeah, exactly. I totally agree.

When I talk to students there's a couple of different perspectives on using electronic [instruments].

One is you can emulate what you would do with a band. Ultimately I'm using the machine to do what a band could do. However I can do it in the middle of the night and I don't have to deal with people and that's certainly one perspective of going about doing this.

The other perspective is to say, what can I do with sound that is unique, uniquely electronic? What are rhythmic patterns that a drummer couldn't play or wouldn't want to play? What are sounds I couldn't get from a band? All these types of things, ways that you can go to create a song, a piece of music. And I think for most people, they really start from their influences, so if you're thinking of, let's say, you know, a rock musician -- a lot of times when they first start producing music on a computer, it kind of sounds like a rock band, though with software synthesizers.

Of course.

But some of the most interesting stuff that I am hearing these day would be in the world of folk music. Artists who say, Geez, I wonder what it's like to work with a drum machine and to see electronic elements coming into musical forms that we don't historically think of as electronic or being connected to electronics, it's great.

I would encourage people to explore sound and explore rhythmic ideas with different types of sounds...

So if someone was starting out, let's say it's a singer-songwriter who's traditionally used to an acoustic guitar and a microphone, right? And they're recording some demo stuff at home, would you push them into the direction of a simple MIDI controller hooked up to their DAW? Or would you encourage them to maybe go hardware first and add some electronic synth elements? What do you think would make sense there for someone just starting?

On modular synthesis: *"You create something and have this really cool sound and you know that you'll never get it again. There's a certain magic involved in that..."*

I would get a $100 MIDI controller, OK? And that's the first place you start because that's kind of like...it's learning to type and it's basically like, here's an easy way for you to get musical ideas into a computer. Let's say for guitarists, especially, who have certain set chord forms that they play all the time. What they find is that it's actually pretty easy to come up with some interesting chords that they could never play a guitar.

That's pretty interesting.

For me, it's always been about how do I use this machine to explore music and for anybody writing a song, ultimately they're exploring music. They're exploring how notes and chords work together and how lyrics kind of go in this really amazing stew that moves people.

So for $100 you can get an [inexpensive] MIDI Controller and [start creating], which is a great starting point.

Absolutely. And most DAWs these days, I mean, they have like 1001 built in sounds. I use Studio One primarily and with the built-in software synths you could do pretty much everything you wanted, even orchestration.

I mean Garage Band, you know, certainly that's a fairly limited sound set and pros might laugh at it, but it has one of the best Hammond organs out there.

I mean for $200 you can get full blown Logic. It's just stupid what a good deal that is.

Do you have a favorite synthesizer?

I have a bunch of Eurorack stuff, but I just got a try out a Sequential Circuits Trigon. I've never owned an analog polyphonic synthesizer and I'm loving it!

Like I mentioned earlier, our mutual friend Jake Wu at Donner put us together because he was coming to the EDI Summit in Boston that that you were working on as a presenting partner. Donner obviously does a lot of amazing stuff in the world of electronic music hardware and production gear. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the event?

So at Berklee, a few years ago we started a program where what we're calling the electronic digital instrument is now a principal instrument at the college. So you can audition to come to Berklee with EDI as your principal instrument. And we kind of define that roughly as some sort of computing device, user installed software and at least one controller. It's a big leap for us.

The last two years we've had a conference that's really based on the practice of EDI people who are either performing, people who are teaching people or those who are designing. So we've had all sorts of people coming in and doing presentations.

Very cool.

It is. And every year we have manufacturers who come in who are doing interesting things, as well. And so, Jake, and the stuff that he and Donner were doing -- there are companies like that committed to doing some really interesting things in [the electronic music community].

So yeah, it's been a great year. This is the second year we've been doing it. We'll be doing it every year so it's kind of a growing thing. It's probably the only conference that I know of that's focused exclusively on electronic performance.

Yeah, Jake was saying really good things about it. And like we discussed, Donner is doing a lot of really cool stuff in that affordable space for artists. In fact, we just got one of their drum pad controllers, which is awesome. And it's, you know, like 100 bucks or something like that.

Donner is perfect for a summit like this, especially with a younger crowd. They have a really interesting company. It's pretty impressive. I'll have to tell you the very honest truth. We met them maybe two years ago at NAMM and we didn't know much about them before we met them there. We went to their booth and we had a meeting and I walked away pretty impressed, because we meet a lot of overseas companies. Especially Chinese companies whose primary purpose is to kind of knock stuff off and dump it on the market and kind of disappear in two years.

Donner has got a much different approach, which I appreciate. You know, they're here for the long haul. They're definitely invested in artist development and making tools for music creators, which is great.

I know you know kids who are coming into college for the first time and thinking about music programs. Berklee is probably at the top of their list. But if you're already an established musician and you're just looking to continue your education, Berklee also offers some summer options and online courses. I don't know if you're involved in any of that, but are there any recommendations you can make for artists who are looking to learn and maybe not do the full-on college experience?

So the [Berklee] online courses are quite good. I'm an online author and I do teach a couple of courses online, too. I think those are great -- the summer programs are usually geared more for students at the high school level, though, so keep that in. mind.

For the EDI conference, it's really for electronic performance, but that's geared for all levels. But I would say there's just so much out on the Internet that that people can learn from. There's all sorts of online learning opportunities and I know [it can be] hard; it can be hard trying to find reliable information or [even] good information. There's just so much stuff out there. People just say this is how you do this, and they're kind of half right [some of the times].

I would highly recommend that people just make a community and connect with people in the community. Just play stuff for each other. Share ideas with each other. And find people who are really good at what you want to be doing and follow them and connect with them. We would love to see more networking opportunities in the Boston area, as well.

Is the EDI Summit open to the public?

Yeah, absolutely.. I would definitely recommend next time that comes around, probably next summer, any of your readers who are interested, especially if they're on the East Coast, definitely come and check it out for themselves.

For more information, please visit **https://college.berklee.edu/electronic-production-design/events/connect-2023-edi-summit**