International Travel Award: Trip report for Sydney, Australia, June 2010

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With the generous support of the Office of International Programs, I recently attended the New Interfaces for Musical Expression conference (NIME 2010), which took place June 15-18, 2010 in Sydney, Australia. I am a post-doctoral researcher in the Electrical & Computer Engineering department designing computationally-Augmented musical instruments and studying the performer-instrument interaction. NIME is the premiere conference within this area of research, and it also represents my first international conference. I attended in order to present my paper "Augmenting the Acoustic Piano with Electromagnetic String Actuation and Continuous Key Position Sensing."

I arrived in Sydney on June 14, allowing a day to adjust to the time zone and orient myself in the city. The conference began June 15 with a series of workshops; I attended a workshop on concepts for next-generation musical interfaces. Formal presentations began June 16 with a keynote by Stelarc, a performance artist incorporating robotic as well as human elements into his work. Papers covered a wide range of topics, including sensors and controllers, mapping strategies from performance to sound, mobile and networked interfaces, and new hardware and software tools. Attending the paper and demo sessions gave me ideas for future directions of my own work, and I met several researchers whose work naturally overlaps with my own. I hope some of these connections will yield collaborations in the future.

I presented my own paper shortly after the July 18 keynote by Nic Collins, an instrument designer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I was very pleased at the positive reception my paper received, and in fact surprised by its intensity. A lively discussion followed my presentation, including questions regarding future directions and applicability to other instruments. Several people approached me to say that they had experimented with the electromagnetic augmentation idea I presented, but that my work had surmounted a number of obstacles that led them to abandon the efforts.

As an interdisciplinary conference, NIME featured both technical papers and musical performances. Each night featured anywhere from one to three consecutive concert events, collectively lasting several hours. This made for a series of long days, but it was enjoyable to see new musical instruments used in performance as well as described in technical detail.

In the course of the four-day event, I met quite a few interesting people with whom I plan to keep in contact, I absorbed new ideas from the community, and in turn began to disseminate my own research. Though my time in Sydney was brief (I left June 21), I was able to visit a few sites in the city and take a short walk in the nearby Blue Mountains. The trip was every bit as professionally and personally rewarding as I hoped it would be.