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Switched on Wendy

Significant Contribution, Achievements and a Career in Contemporary Music as a Pioneer of Synthesized Sound

by Daniel Rue, Music Technology, June 1993

Article appeared in Polare magazine: April 1996 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015

Though not exactly obscuring the achievements of a twenty-eight-year career as a pioneer of synthesized sound, the operation through which Walter Carlos changed gender and became Wendy Carlos has always carried with it that element of sensationalism which has threatened to sideline her contribution to contemporary music. And that contribution has been considerable.



Wendy Carlos

Though latterly regarded as something of a novelty album, the impact of *Switched On Bach* on an unsuspecting world back in 1968 cannot be overstated. Simply put: for many of the millions of people that heard it, it was the first use of pure, electronic sound as a credible means of producing music.

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It couldn't have happened at a more opportune moment. Electronic music was, seemingly, still held in the stranglehold of the experimentalists Stockhausen, Cage, Berio et al. whose apparent rejection of anything that could be considered to have "entertainment value" had effectively restricted its appreciation to a small group somewhere at the margins of the avant-garde. Unlike many of her contemporaries working with electronic sound, Carlos apparently had no desire to "re-invent" music through new forms of notation, the introduction of random elements, or the reliance on chance, and was content to simply re-adjust our perception of what could be achieved through the processing of sound from electronic sources.

The release of *Switched On Bach* dovetailed perfectly with (indeed, was prompted by) the development of the music synthesizer - in this case the Moog - and in many ways acted as

the catalyst for the interest which was starting to surround this new and exciting departure in instrument technology. The choice of Bach concertos as the album's musical source was equally inspired. It carried with it the respectability that could only come from music written by one of the world's greatest composers, yet didn't place undue expressive and dynamic demands on an instrument still at a relatively early stage in its development.

Classically trained in music at Brown University and physics at Columbia, Carlos went on to become the first person to use vocoders - in the film score for Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* - and predated "new age" music by more than a decade with environmental/ambient compositions like *Sonic Seasonings*. After writing scores for Kubrick's *The Shining* and Disney's *Tron*, Carlos successfully replicated an entire philharmonic orchestra, using additive F.M. synthesis, on 1984's *Digital Moonscape*. And the ground-breaking continued with the album *Beauty In the Beast*, an exploration into alternative scales and tunings based on the music of Bali, India, Bulgaria, Africa and Tibet.

Carlos' most recent work is *Switched On Bach 2000*, a reworking of the compositions included in her original 1968 recording using current techniques and computer sequencing, digital recording and editing, and digital synthesis.

As Carlos says of her work, "It's a question of personal integrity. You have to be a little obsessive, and a little bit aware of things as a left-hemisphere person. You have to know what you're doing. But after that's all done, you put the driver in charge as being your soul, your emotion, your gut, your intuition".

Wendy Carlos

From Wikipedia:  Grammy Award winning composer and musician Wendy Carlos was born on November 14, 1939 at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, U.S.A. Carlos was aware of her gender dysphoria from an early age stating, "I was about five or six ... I remember being convinced I was a little girl, much preferring long hair and girls' clothes, and not knowing why my parents didn't see it clearly."



In 1962 she moved to New York City to attend Columbia University and came into contact with information about transgenderism (including the work of Harry Benjamin). In early 1968 she began hormone treatments and soon began living full-time as a woman. After the success of *Switched-On Bach*, in May of 1972 Carlos was able to undergo sex reassignment surgery.

Carlos chose to announce herself as the featured interview in May 1979's *Playboy* magazine, picking *Playboy* because "The magazine has always been concerned with liberation, and I'm anxious to liberate myself". She has since come to regret the interview, creating a "[Shortlist of the Cruel](#)" page on her website, and awarding the editors of the magazine three "Black Leafs" indicating that she believes they are "Arrogant selfish prig[s], with a genuine sadistic streak."

Carlos prefers not to discuss her reassignment, and has asked that her privacy regarding the subject be respected. More information about Wendy Carlos can be found [on her website](#).

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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