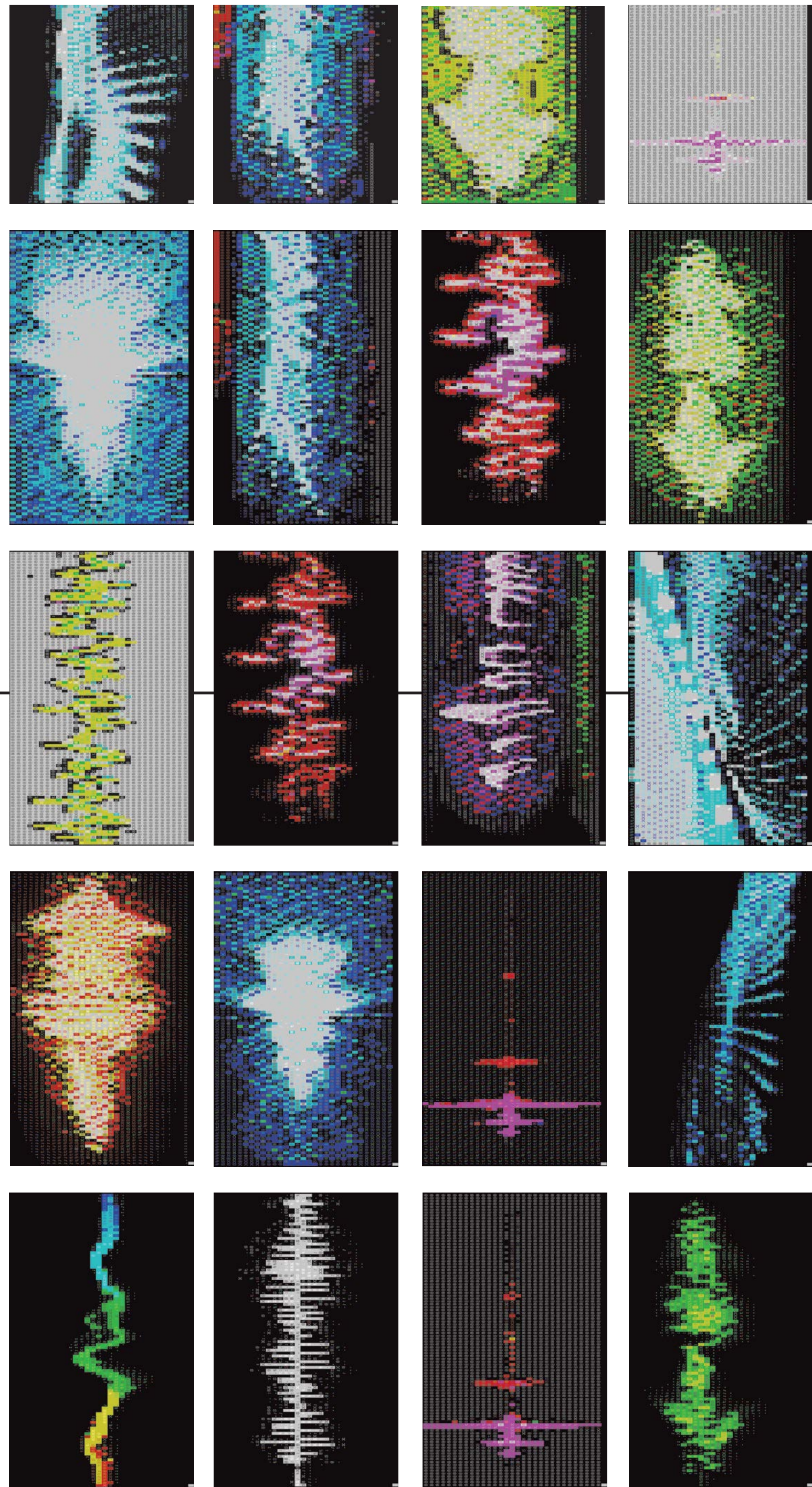


“I really love computers,

# An Interview with Composer/Programmer Rebekah Wilson



# The Unbearable Beauty of Computing

I love the fact that you tell them what to do and they do it”

All images from Primer, courtesy Rebekah Wilson.

**Rebekah Wilson** started writing music when she was a child in New Zealand. By the time she went to University it was assumed that she would become a composer, but once there she took a class in what was, at that time in the early '90s called “electro-acoustic music,” and her whole world changed. All the students in the class used the same computer which had one type of software to make music on. “I remember thinking, ‘We’re all using the same software to write music and I’m just going to sound the same as everybody else.’” Wilson tells me over Skype from her home in Amsterdam. “I wanted to know whether I could write software that would make me sound like me.” That experience led her to start becoming involved with computers and teaching herself how to write software.

After University Wilson worked as the artistic director of STEIM (Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music) which is a music institute based in the Netherlands. STEIM focuses on the human/machine interaction and asks questions like: Who’s making the music? Is the machine making the music? When you push a button and software makes the music, what kind of agency do you have? The institute was also responsible for the push to make electronic music more accessible

to audiences through encouraging artists like Laurie Anderson who attached sensors to her violin in order to manipulate the sound.

After STEIM Wilson moved to Chicago and started a company called Source Elements, which creates recording software that is fully collaborative. Used by musicians to work remotely, large studios like Disney and Warner Brothers, and orchestras, the software allows collaborators to hear each other as if they were in the same room. So if you’re a conductor in Los Angeles who is leading an orchestra in Prague and you need to rehearse before flying out there, you can use Wilson’s software to listen to the orchestra practice and hear every note perfectly. “It’s a really beautiful piece of software,” Wilson tells me proudly. “You can even hear a pin drop or material rustling.”

In 2016, after almost a decade spent building Source Elements, Wilson decided to enroll at Victoria University to do her Masters in Composition. She completed her thesis on Telematic Music, or playing music together over the internet in Real-Time. “Now I feel like a composer again. I’ve got projects going on, I was just talking to a pianist, we’re writing a piece together over the internet, so it’s fun to be back to who I wanted to be as a little girl.” Wilson tells me.

Most recently, Wilson created a program called Primer (pictured). Part autobiography, part musical composition, the program is like a choose your own adventure which takes you through Wilson’s life with dazzling visuals and sounds. When I ask Wilson how she came up with the idea for Primer she tells me, laughing, “That’s like asking when you got the idea to have cereal for breakfast. You just know. It’s a natural progression of the work.” She adds, “But what I did want to show, and this is something that I would hope you feel when you play it, is that you get to experience what it’s like to program a computer. Because I really love computers, I love the fact that you tell them what to do and they do it. And they surprise you because sometimes you don’t know what the parameters are. It really is fascinating.”

This year, in addition to returning to STEIM as Director of Celebrations for their fiftieth anniversary, Wilson will be writing an academic paper for the Orpheus Institute in Belgium called “Beyond Isomorphism,” working on a remote piano duet in which the score will be generated using fluctuations in the internet, and building more programs like Primer which will eventually talk to each other and work in concert. •