How a computer program became classical music's hot, new composer

'Emily Howell' is a computer program that composes classical music by following rules of music its programmer taught it.

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He believes that Emily, which is "nowhere near artificial intelligence," and other artistically able machines signal a chance for collaboration with human artists, not a digital replacement for them. "Computers are there [for us] to extend ourselves through them," he says. "It seems so utterly natural to me. It's not like I taught a rock to compose music."

Los Angeles Times classical-music critic Mark Swed says although he has received copies of Emily's works, he has not listened to them yet, in part because the composer is a computer.

Fred Childs, host of the popular public radio show "Performance Today," says he was impressed with Emily's songs.

"I enjoyed them," Mr. Childs says. "I thought they were really accomplished imitations of other composers' styles." However, "it felt a little mechanical in a way. But then again, I knew I was listening to a computer," he added. "If I hadn't known that, I might've thought it's the work of some not-so-great composer who is trying some interesting things, but not quite getting it."

The fact that a computer can create music that's indistinguishable from what a human can compose "scares" Childs a bit, but he says he has no problem with the idea of computers writing music.

"The proof is not in who composes it or who is responsible for writing the notes. The proof is in the emotional reaction the music triggers," he says. Emily "wasn't quite there" in terms of sparking his emotions.

Childs's sentiment touches on one of the core problems with computers experimenting with music. In 2008, a study from the University of Sussex in England found that, even when a person does not know the source of a performance, the human brain has a stronger emotional response to music played by humans than work performed by a computer.

Similarly, some question Cope's assertion that Emily is truly an artistic machine. "I think there's a creative aspect to music that is still well beyond what a computer can do," says Aniruddh Patel, a

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senior fellow at The Neurosciences Institute in San Diego.

Others have argued that Cope's invention and his claims that its work is truly creative is disrespectful to artists who put passion, emotion, and feelings into their work based on years of human experience – something a computer can't share.

But Cope says he welcomes such criticism. "I want people to have different ideas than me," he says. "My wife will tell you one of the strangest things about me is I enjoy the controversy.... As a teacher that's how you learn things."

Emily's album, "From Darkness, Light," is available in some music shops and through Apple's online iTunes Store. Cope says the young composer will follow up with a new album annually for the next five or six years.

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