

Although I firmly believe that many of these works deserve praise, what I am more interested in is their being understood and, in consequence, appreciated. The panel I chaired at ICMC 2004 focused on appreciation—something most ICMC artists encounter much too little of. Until we have found a better balance to that “economics” problem introduced above, the place of the post-mortem review is not clear to me. I would prefer to see active musical debate (and distribution) replace the review until the status of appreciation has been improved.

## Festival Reviews

### Spark Festival of Electronic Music and Art

February 16-20, 2005

University of Minnesota

*Brian Kane*

Spark 2005, hosted by the University of Minnesota and organized by Douglas Geers, presented a broad array of compositional, conceptual, intellectual and improvisational work in electronic music. Transcending the stylistic and artistic preconceptions that often pigeonhole the vast terrain of electronic music into distinct categories, Spark 2005 presented an exciting, arresting and balanced sampling of recent pieces and research. Spanning four days, the festival included panel discussions; papers on recent research in computer music, technology and aesthetics; concerts of live electroacoustic music, eight-channel tape pieces, multimedia works and improvised sets; installations; lectures and seminars; and demonstrations of new technology.

The keynote artist was composer Philippe Manoury, who lectured on two recent works: *Sound and Fury*,

commissioned by the Chicago Symphony, and *K*, his most recent opera based on Kafka's *The Trial*. The majority of the lecture was devoted to explaining the analogies between Faulkner's great novel and Manoury's work. Disregarding any programmatic representation of the novel, Manoury discussed the musical way in which the novel unfolds in time. Through the negation of chronological narrativity, both Faulkner and Manoury unfold events that become fully clarified only as the piece develops. In addition to his lecture, Manoury's *Jupiter*, a seminal piece in the development and application of computer-based score-following techniques, was brilliantly performed by Elizabeth McNutt. Manoury also held a master class seminar where he looked at the work of graduate composers at the University of Minnesota.

As for live performance, some of the festival highlights included a concert of chamber pieces with electronics performed by NeXT Ens, which included works by Burton Beerman, Douglas Geers, Gabriel Ottoson-Deal, Zack Browning and Margaret Schedel. This group is dedicated to performing works of live electronic and computer music, and its musical, intelligent and intense performance reveals a tremendous commitment to their mission. In particular, Shiau-uen Ding, the director and pianist, is a powerful force on the new music scene. Her solo recital, where she

performed a wide variety of pieces by composers James Mobberly, Christopher Bailey, Katherine Norman, Eric Chasalow, Corte Lippe and Jonathan Harvey, was staggering in its sheer breadth. Her handling of Lippe's classic *Music for Piano and Computer* and Harvey's eerie *Tombeau de Messiaen* was truly remarkable: clear, smart, aggressive, precise and lovely. Another excellent concert featured an assortment of electroacoustic works by such composers as Noel Zahler, Alicyn Warren, Butch Rován, and Anthony Cornicello. In particular, Rován's work for cello, electronics and video was a true multimedia masterpiece. Based on the poetry of Anne Carson, *Hopper Confessions* simultaneously presents a series of short musical pieces (which beautifully integrated the cello and the electronics) with words and video. Rován managed to capture the pacing and the feel that one gets while reading poetry silently to oneself by slowly superimposing the text over a video filled with dark and moody images.

In addition to the concerts and performances, many of the papers presented at Spark 2005 were of unusually high quality. Robert Rowe's "Personal Effects: Weaning Interactive Systems from MIDI" addressed the impact of technological obsolescence on the survival of electronic and interactive pieces that are facing imminent extinction from the repertoire. By reconstructing obsolete hardware in environments like MAX/MSP

or in open source code, older pieces can be saved from technological destruction. Scott Miller's paper "Audio Mobiles" explored some exciting new directions in eco-systemic programming based on Agostino Di Scipio's ideas. By using the computer as an autonomous system within the sonic ecology of some given space, Miller creates fascinating sound sculptures that cause and effect changes in the sonic landscape. In addition, his work raises interesting and complex questions about the nature and grounding of aesthetic experience.

Several papers on Friday morning's session addressed aspects of Pierre Schaeffer's work. Marcus Bittencourt used Schaeffer's criteria for musical instruments as a framework within which to create an unusual virtual instrument—a "Tusk Harp" that he uses in his radio-opera entitled *KA*. George Brunner's lecture on the evolution and development of Text Sound traced the origins of this fascinating movement back to Schaeffer and some of his original premises and goals concerning *musique concrète*. These premises were challenged in this reviewer's own presentation on Schaeffer and the philosophical origins of *musique concrète*.

With a new generation of composers, and with the general increase in access to recording technology, the line between popular music and academic electronic music is beginning to vanish. One of the great virtues of Spark 2005 was the

way it wove these two strands seamlessly together. The festival began with an opening lecture by DJ Spooky, who has managed to straddle both the academic and popular worlds through sheer musical and intellectual force. But it is clear that DJ Spooky is not alone. In fact, many of the events and performances at Spark were engaged, directly or indirectly, with popular music. J. Anthony Allen, Margaret Schedel, Per Bloland and Robert Hamilton held a round-table discussion on the problems facing the young composer today. Not surprisingly, much of the discussion was centered around the role and influences of popular music on young composers versus the academic pressures to produce autonomous art music. But what was surprising was the way in which the festival, through its vast array of performances of widely divergent styles and its appropriation of non-academic performance spaces, made the question moot. In particular, each night of the festival was capped off by a set of experimental performances held in a casual setting. Some memorable performances were J. Anthony Allen's set of music for drum, bass, electronics and video, an improvised set by Seji Takahasi and Michi Yokota, and an evening featuring Keith O'Brien and some local DJs.

Even within the usual electroacoustic and chamber music setting, a few pieces stood out because of the manner in which they tied the academic and the popular together.

Josh Clausen, a young composer studying in Minneapolis, created dense, aggressive and funky rhythms based on pre-recorded phonemes in his eight-channel piece *Phoneme Play*. Zack Browning's *Secret Pulse* for flute, violin, cello and computer generated sound applied magic squares onto musical structures such as density, timbre, rhythm, style and orchestration. The result is a collage of rapid crosscuts, evoking the flashy production of pop music and the jagged complexity of Frank Zappa.

In surveying the variety of artistic and intellectual activity presented at Spark 2005, one clear theme emerged: the issue of mapping in music. For example, how can some set of originally non-musical data be mapped onto musical parameters? This question was explored by three works in particular: Michael Berkowski's *Species*, Craig A. Coburn's lecture on musical landscapes and satellite data, and Henrik Frisk's *etherSound*. In *Species*, Berkowski takes John Conway's classic "Game of Life" algorithm and maps its generations of cells onto harmonic partials, creating giant spectral structures that evolve over time into more or less stable states. Coburn's work, based on satellite images taken over Canadian cities, takes another approach to parametric mapping. Each pixel of the image, which possesses five different parameters (three for color, two for location), is mapped onto musical

parameters, transforming these images into a riotous and dynamic player piano. Frisk's *etherSound* installation allows the audience to send a text message to a computer that maps their message into a stretch of sound. The transformations are based on factors such as the number of words in the message, syllables per word, vowel sounds, and other phonological data. Some technical problems arose due to the differences between European and American cell phone protocols, but in an ideal setting, the work would allow the audience members a unique opportunity to investigate the nature of the mapping through trial and error.

In all of these works, the mapping of parameters from one domain to another was much like an act of translation. Other works handled the question of mapping differently, moving towards an artistic investigation that seemed more akin to poetic metaphor than translation. Dennis Miller's *faktura*, a work for sound and video, presented a continuously evolving series of virtual textured landscapes paired with musical soundscapes. Both the audio and the video were on equal footing here, one mutually supporting the other, highlighting similarities between the aural and the tactile senses. In Margaret Schedel's *Cassini Division*, written for cello, violin, flute, percussion, bowed piano, electronics and video, a different balance was struck between the aural and the visual. Here,

a single video image is superimposed upon itself and transformed over time based on information gathered from the performers. The visual impression of a single, slowly transforming object was the perfect complement to the music, which explored an extremely reduced palate of sound objects in an astonishing variety of ways. Finally, the *60x60 Project* premiered a video accompaniment to the collection of sixty short tape pieces, each one minute in length. Video artist Shimpei Takeda worked with a series of visual motives, mostly taken from rural and urban landscapes, transforming the piece from a compilation into a "meta-composition." The imagery, which focused intensely on specific aspects of the landscape, acted like a well-chosen metaphor for the music, which was also constrained to a small amount of material due to the formal limits of composing a one-minute piece. In many respects, Takeda's visuals, as sophisticated and modern as they were, also reminded this reviewer of the classic short film by Ray and Charles Eames where an asphalt playground is being washed down; both reveal the unexpected beauty and complexity of the common visual landscape.

In conclusion, Spark 2005 was a tremendous success, and the credit goes to Douglas Geers (with the help of his students) and the University of Minnesota. If, in future years, the Spark festival

continues to present a large variety of high-quality works and papers, there is no doubt that it will become one of the nation's premiere festivals for new work in electronic music and art.

### **Electronic Music Midwest September 16-18, 2004 Lewis University Doug Geers**

The sixth Electronic Music Midwest festival happened September 16-18, 2004 in Romeville, Illinois (USA), south of Chicago. Organized by Mike McFerron (Lewis University), Paul Rudy (University of Missouri-Kansas City), Connie Mayfield (Kansas City Community College), Ian Corbett (Kansas City Community College), and Jay C. Batzner (University of Missouri-Kansas City), this festival alternates its location annually, and was hosted this time by Mike McFerron at Lewis University.

Presented with a particular interest in the theme of globalization, EMM 2004 consisted of eight concerts, several paper sessions, a roundtable discussion, and a special opening event meant to reach out to non-aficionados of electroacoustic music. Guest artists included a large number of composers and performers from across the world, and featured composer Kevin Austin (Concordia University) and a concert by the Cincinnati-based NeXT Ens.

The theme of globalization was integrated into the festival as part of an ongoing series of events at Lewis University called "The Many Faces of Globalization." With this theme in mind, the first event of the festival on the evening of September 16 was the "EMM/Globalization Welcoming Concert," a two-hour presentation by Kevin Austin that could loosely be called a lecture. However, Austin's presentation style, as well as his use of both sound and video, gave the evening an atmosphere more like a variety show, albeit a thoughtful and intellectual one (if such things exist). Austin strode, stalked, and even danced in the Philip Lynch Theater as he spoke about the changes that globalization and electroacoustic sound reproduction have brought to music since their inception, making extensive use of diverse audio and video examples. The audience included many Lewis University faculty and students of various majors. Music played during this concert included recordings of traditional Chinese music played on MIDI instruments, a video of the Twelve Girls Band playing a medley of classical themes, Hugh LeCaine's *Dripsody*, Max Mathews's 1958 realization of *Bicycle Built for Two*, readings by Jack Kerouac, James Joyce, and Dylan Thomas, and more.

After this opening presentation, the remaining concerts featured a wide variety of works, including music for live performers with electronics, pieces

for two- and eight-channel playback, and electroacoustic music with video. Moreover, although many of the works on these concerts were likable, for the sake of brevity I have selected a small number of them to discuss here.

One interesting work from the first concert on September 17 was James Caldwell's *Texturologie II: Density 10.6*, played by alto flutist Andrea Redcay Graves. In this piece, a gently lyrical work, particular flute pitches and attack/amplitude values triggered arpeggios of computer-generated sounds and controlled aspects of them such as brightness, tempo, pitch range and contour. Although seemingly simple, the work was effective in that the performer used her own performance gestures to control the computer's gestures, and because the relationship between these felt completely organic. The work's only shortcoming was that the limited harmonic language, combined with the call and response relationship between the flute and computer that pervaded nearly the entire piece, made it feel, despite its attractive surface, a bit long.

J. Anthony Allen's *Saturations III-B* for two-channel tape was another appealing, focused work. All the sounds of the piece were derived from filtered noise, but Allen successfully built this basic material into a convincing repertoire of gestures, and used pulse and crescendos to generate sustained tension.

Benjamin Broening's *Arioso/Doubles* for clarinet and Max/MSP used the French Baroque variation technique of doubles as a conceptual inspiration for a work in which both melody and timbre develop and vary thematically. The melodic shapes and flowering of motivic material were both excellently realized, giving the piece a strong sense of coherence, sustained energy, and forward motion. The MSP processing consisted mostly of soft waves of harmonic material, delays, and reverberation. This was subtly realized, creating a halo-like trail behind the clarinet. The development of the computer material was possibly a bit too subtle, though, in that its general character did not seem to change dramatically during the piece.

The entire concert by the NeXT Ens was a pleasure. This recently formed group, whose members are graduate students in music at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, is dedicated to performing electroacoustic repertoire. Chamber groups devoted entirely to electroacoustic music are unfortunately rather rare in the USA, and although NeXT only began performing in 2004, this concert demonstrated that they have already developed into an expressive, cohesive ensemble.

The instrumentation of the NeXT Ens is flute/piccolo, alto, guitar, percussion, piano, violin, and cello. The group performed seven works of varying

instrumental combinations and aesthetic approaches on their program, and all of the performances sounded precise and committed. Highlights of their program included Mara Helmuth's *The Edge of Noise*, a quirky but convincing ensemble-plus-MSP work that explored non-traditional instrumental noises, seemingly non sequitur vocalizations, parody, and spicy harmonies. This piece succeeded in unifying the disparate materials, and its humor seemed more like existential commentary than silliness. Sean Verah's *Slipping Image* for ensemble and tape developed from angular interjections to an elegiac ending, sustaining interest with thematic development and excellent instrumental writing. Christopher Bailey's *The Quiet Play of Pipes* brought forth pungently expressive microtonal harmonies from the group, aided once again by computer sounds generated in Max/MSP. The spectral colors of this work evolved as if in slow motion, lingering and breathing gently, with sounds reminiscent of industrial noise occasionally drifting into the texture. In addition, NeXT also played works by Dorothy Hindman, Jen Wang, and Ivica Ico Bucvic; each contained intriguing moments.

Jeff Harriot's *Design* for bass clarinet and fixed media playback served as a gentle opening to the festival's second day. The piece was minimalist in conception, with slowly repeating patterns of pitches that outlined consonant intervals. Bass

clarinetist Jeffrey Ouper played mostly long notes that wafted in and out of the texture, moving from *niente* to *piano* and to *niente* once more. As this work began, I was prepared to become bored, but Harriot's subtle manipulation of the simple material held my attention through most of the piece.

The second concert on Saturday featured works with video. Of these, three especially successful pieces were *Interludes* by Keith Kothman (music) and John Fillwalk (video), *Slowly Sinking Slower* by Douglass Bielmeier, and *Underground* by Tom Lopez (music) and Nate Pagel (video). *Interludes* consisted of three movements, and the video for each of these focused on a single subject: a field of grass, a merry-go-round, and birds in air. The images moved slowly and were subtly processed, and the music matched this well, with long and often spare sonic lines. *Slowly Sinking Slower* mixed raw footage of intriguing but not always identifiable outdoor objects and scenes with dreamlike music in which long drones created a darkly meditative feel. *Underground*, in contrast, sought to express the energy of a London subway station. Its video included clearly recognizable parts of the station: subway cars, turnstiles, passengers, etc., but also subjected the raw footage to significant processing, so that much of the work was a collage of visual design. Meanwhile, the music to the piece worked in a similar manner:

Mr. Lopez used a palette of sounds dominated by struck and plucked sounds, including several piano-like and bell-like timbres. He manipulated them quite interestingly and deployed them at times in a manner of acousmatic music, at others as interlocking pulsed modal patterns in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Paul Lansky's works, and at several other places as energetic techno music. The result was dense, interesting, and fun. Moreover, Lopez's clever transitions between these genres pointed out the similarities among them, most noticeably in their use of rhythmic gesture. However, although *Underground* succeeded as a piece, it did have some flaws. First, and most importantly, I felt that the video and music sometimes seemed out of step with each other. An example of this is the end of the piece, where slow, fuzzy, contemplative shots of turnstiles were accompanied by very upbeat pop-like music. Another problem I had with the piece was that I enjoyed the music's swerving stylistic presentation but felt that some moments sounded a bit too "MIDI" for my taste.

Another piece that succeeded was Jeremy Spindler's *Glassworks and Silverscapes*, a work which I would describe as a "kinder and gentler" type of acousmatic music, in that it featured the granularization of sounds into a myriad of gestures without overusing explosive gesture shapes. I must admit, by the way, that I am dismayed by the number of composers who think that if one "punch

in the face" gesture is a good thing, then a piece consisting of fifty of them must be wonderful. I have left concerts in the past feeling literally abused. However, Mr. Spindler's work avoided that Jerry Bruckheimer approach to composition, and created clever gestures from samples of a toy piano, with a particularly good use of space to rhetorically animate them.

Paul Rudy's *Love Song*, which appeared later on the same program, combined field recordings from outdoor locations with recorded vocalizations into a convincing sonic journey through several distinct musical scenes. This piece also featured a moving apotheosis near its end, created in part by building a thick harmonic block of timbre.

The final concert of EMM 2004 featured another performance by Kevin Austin, this time as composer and diffuser. Austin's *Three Zheng Etudes (Version II)* were a set of exquisite playback works that imagined physically impossible performances of the zheng, a traditional Chinese instrument. Each of the movements used a seemingly simple bit of recorded zheng as its basic material, but then spun out a wonderfully shaped and endearing tapestry of sound. Another successful work on this concert was Per Bloland's *The Wondrous Delight of Profound Ineptitude*. Reading the program note, I was a bit concerned about this piece, because it mentioned the use of

recordings from an anti-war rally, and I find that it is very hard to write political music that transcends politics. However, this work effectively captured the visceral feelings of urgency from the rally without merely becoming a document of it. The recordings were highly edited, and thematic materials were drawn from them and repeated with variations, so that the listener's experience was primarily sonic/musical and not literary. In other words, Mr. Bloland developed his materials in a convincing way, and the result was a compelling composition.

EMM ended with Larry Austin's *Tableaux: Convolutions on a Theme* for alto saxophone, reverberation, and eight-channel tape. This fifteen-minute work was written for saxophonist Stephen Duke, who performed it here. The computer part of this work comprised a harmonic tapestry, and the saxophone part was a semi-improvisatory fantasia over the tape. As the work progressed, the tape harmonies became increasingly bright in timbre, and the saxophone became more energized. Finally, in the last minutes of the piece, a famous nineteenth-century theme was revealed as the source for the entire composition. In performance, this piece worked quite well as a showpiece for Mr. Duke, whose intense and virtuosic playing held the audience's attention throughout.