

Symphonies in Cybersound

By Chris Fujiwara, Globe Correspondent, 5/3/2001

Technical obstacles and programming prejudices mean that classics of electronic music are all too rarely heard in concert. In fact, to get them right, sometimes the hall itself has to be refitted.

"For a lot of this music, you have to think of the hall as part of the musical instrument," explains Eric Chasalow, director of the Brandeis Electro-Acoustic Music Studio, or BEAMS. As part of the ongoing Boston Cyberarts Festival,

Chasalow has organized a marathon concert of electro-acoustic music to take place this weekend.

Along with picking the pieces and recruiting the performers, this means he's also overseeing the final touches on refurbishing of the university's Slosberg Recital Hall. The chamber music-size hall is being equipped, for the occasion, with a four-channel sound system. Stacks of speakers are on the stage and at the back of the auditorium.

Starting Saturday at 9:30 a.m. and ending 15 1/2 hours later at 1 a.m. Sunday, the concert will feature classic and contemporary electronic works in a kind of environment where they are rarely encountered.

The improved sound system will do justice to a number of pieces conceived for discrete four-channel sound. "You're actually going to hear the sound moving around the space," Chasalow promises.

The marathon intersperses live performances (by, among others, soprano Frances Lynch, the Italian Modern Ensemble, and the Lydian String Quartet) with the playing of landmark recordings by John Cage and Iannis Xenakis.

Designed for the 1958 Brussels World Fair, "Concret PH," the Xenakis piece - a shower of amplified sound produced by burning charcoal - is one of the most packed and thrilling three minutes in recorded music. Chasalow selected it to open and close the concert.

How many people will stay to hear it twice? "I expect we're going to get a few hardy souls who come first thing in the morning and be proud about staying all the way through," says Chasalow. "And if they come for an hour or half an hour, that's just fine. Marathons are festive occasions."

Electronic music will be celebrated in several other venues this weekend as well.

Composer George Antheil's 1924 "Ballet Mecanique" is part of the program of a free concert at Symphony Hall tonight called "Orchestral Music at the Technological

Frontier," copresented by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) and Immersion Music.

"Ballet Mecanique" is not, strictly speaking, an electronic work. But it marked a breakthrough in the musical use of mechanical instruments (including airplane propellers). Moreover, the full realization of the piece has become possible only with digital technology.

The score calls for numerous player pianos (12 will be onstage tonight) to play synchronously, a feat beyond the mechanical capabilities of the instruments.

The Symphony Hall concert will also feature Andre Jolivet's Concerto for Ondes Martenot and Orchestra, with Genevieve Grenier on ondes martenot - the earliest electronic instrument to gain wide acceptance among composers.

Ani Kavafian will play another unusual instrument, Tod Machover's hyperviolin, in "Forever and Ever," the third part of the Hyperstring Trilogy.

From John Oswald comes what may be the world's first Concerto for Conductor and Orchestra. BMOP artistic director Gil Rose, who will conduct, explains: "The conductor is aided by a technological program created by Teresa Marrin Nakra [of MIT's Media Lab], which allows the conductor to play audio samples while interacting with the orchestra, who are playing acoustic samples of their own music.

"I don't want to give away too much, because the piece is kind of a novelty," Rose adds. "It explores the convention of starting a concert."

The concert's other premiere is by Brandeis's Chasalow: "Dream Songs," an orchestral work using a computer-manipulated recording of texts from John Berryman's poetic cycle in a way that, the composer says, "allows me to maintain the central voice of the poem while projecting something of its fractured, layered complexity."

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