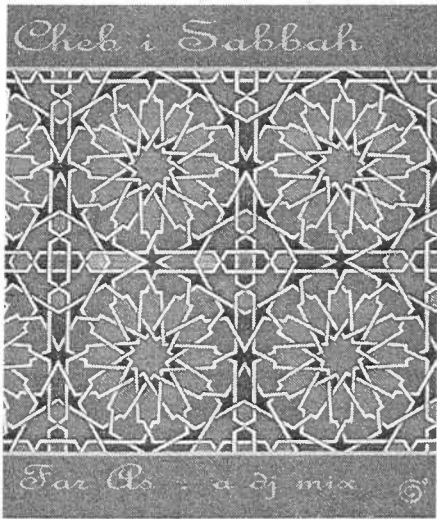


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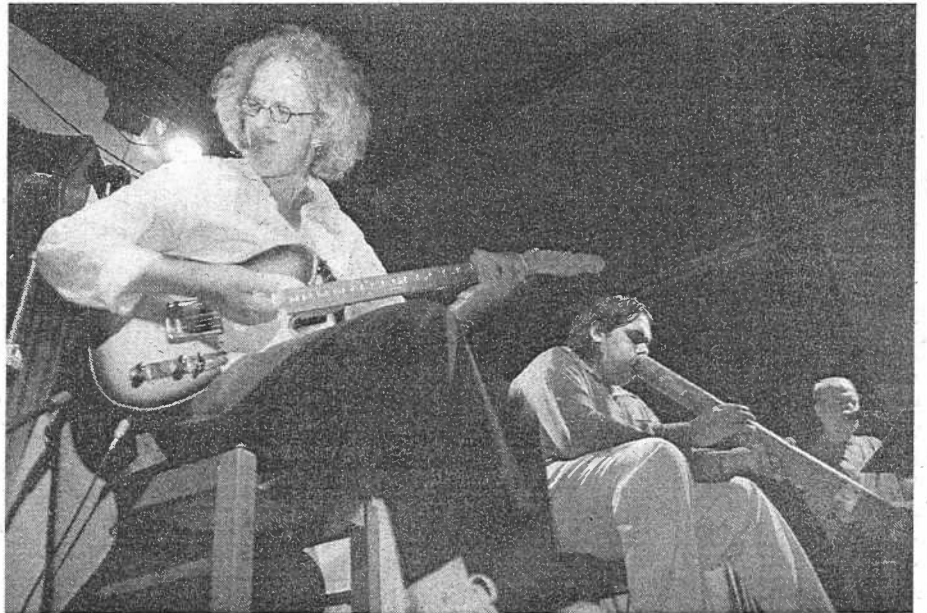


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William Duckworth Structures Ambience Through Melody



Photograph by Shiho Fukada

CATHEDRAL
 August 6
 Cutting Room

GLOBAL RECIPE

BY KYLE GANN

There comes a time when even a brilliant composer will realize that sitting at home and writing great music isn't enough. Those who take leave of the studio and plunge into action deserve respect. William Duckworth—for my money the best composer of the post-minimal generation, with a lean and elegantly seductive style—decided in 1997 to make his music global with an ongoing Internet composition called *Cathedral*. At six years old, the piece has been performed in Tokyo, Brisbane, and New York among other places, consisting of live webcast performances with online interactive participation along with Duckworth's own composed music and the contributions of several collaborators. *Cathedral* seems ripe—yet not nearing exhaustion.

And the piece has changed. When I first wrote about it in 2000, Duckworth was straining to filter diverse elements into a recognizably homogenous atmospheric mass. No longer: Having worked with some of the same musicians over and over, the piece is steeped in individual talents and all Duckworth has to do is put them in place, poke them a little, and they spring to life. The August 6 performance at the Cutting Room, for instance, featured William Barton, a young didgeridoo virtuoso. "Blue" Gene Tyranny played his inimitable melodies on piano; Abel Domingues played sporadic riffs on guitar; DJ Tamara spun discs; Nora Farrell on computer moderated among the contributions, including those of anonymous Internet participants. Yet for 90 minutes the sound of the music fused into a massive amplification of the pulsing drone of Barton's didgeridoo.

So, in the beginning was pulsation. After a moment, huge, deep booms marked off a slow, regular beat. Bird sounds and rain were overlaid, and Tyranny would hit dense, Ivesian chords of which one note would resolve, creating a charming illusion of harmonic lucidity. A drumbeat started up, though no drums were in evidence. One of

The boys in the Cathedral band

the happiest latter-day changes to *Cathedral* has been the addition of Arthur Sabatini as an unreliable narrator called the Chronicler, improvising verbally on the connections between the five points in history around which *Cathedral* is structured (the building of the Great Pyramid, the groundbreaking for Chartres Cathedral, the founding of the Lakota ghost dance religion, the detonation of the first atomic bomb, and the creation of the World Wide Web). "The music," Sabatini assured us, "was supposed to draw the connections. . . . A vast project was the only way of escaping the tyranny of presence." Was the Chronicler telling us a story or describing *Cathedral* itself?

Sabatini's narration sometimes turned the work into a Robert Ashley-style opera, but ultimately his words were no more privileged than the riffs from Domingues's guitar. Over six years Duckworth has distilled a foolproof recipe for his own multilayered ambient-musical pudding. The base layer is the comforting, predictable pulse/drone elements: the throbbing didgeridoo, the drumbeat. Over that is the nonrepeating "noise" layer—the birdsongs, guitar riffs, Tyranny's resolving chords. And on top, appearing and disappearing, are the structured melodic elements that intermittently shape the work: Tyranny's lyric melodies, the exotically modal Duckworthian tunes that occasionally arise from his computer, and Sabatini's tentative musings, sometimes humorous, sometimes tantalizingly quasi-profound.

Is this the recipe for ambient/Internet music whose progress we'll be following decades hence?

Plus, somewhere in there were sounds that originated with enthusiasts tuning in (at monroestreet.com/cathedral/stage/), playing the "Pitchweb," and adding melodies of their own. You couldn't tell which those were, for Duckworth had his own samples and DJ Tamara had her compact discs; the origin of almost anything remained mysterious. Made for the competing demands of the inchoate 21st century, the music allowed detailed and distracted listening, offering complexity of detail and simplicity of atmosphere. Is this the recipe for ambient/Internet music whose development we'll still be following decades hence?