

MUSIC

MUSIC FOR THEREMIN

IT'S NOT JUST FOR ALIENS ANYMORE

By KYLE GANN

THE KURSTINS *Tonic* August 9

By all rights, that whacky, eerie-sounding box called the theremin should be as dead as the brachyosaurus and as quaint as the bustle. Instead, it's undergoing a renaissance that threatens to legitimize its status as a standard instrument. One lesson history teaches is that great art never gravitates toward cutting-edge technology, but to the gizmos that just became obsolete—think of Conlon Nancarrow discovering the player piano just after recordings killed it as a parlor instrument. Now that we have enough interactive digital technology to allow eight-year-olds to simulate the Berlin Philharmonic, you'd think theremins would

renderings of Saint-Saëns's "The Swan," you'll find little resembling either—instead, there are fairly conservative but solidly modernist works treating the instrument with scrupulous respect. Two are rare recordings of works by Joseph Schillinger, the eccentric would-be revolutionary who conceptualized a mathematical basis for all artistic beauty, and whose arithmetical composing methods guided a generation of Tin Pan Alley songwriters. The introverted romanticism of his style (demonstrated with noted Cage pianist Joshua Pierce as accompanist) is echoed in the disc's most ambitious work, a 1944 fantasia for oboe, piano, string quartet, and theremin by Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu, which uses the oboe as intermediary between theremin and strings.

What's impressive is that the theremin sounds not at all out of place in these classical surroundings, so distinct and free from glissando is Kavina's sense of pitch even in the most angular atonal lines. Her own Suite from 1989 has a similar Eastern Europe-tinged romanticism—but postmodern rather than derivative, for she handles her ostinatos and tonal counterpoint with too much originality to make her sound like a throwback. You get a little more alien-evoking stereotypicality in *Mixolydia*



GREG AND PAMELIA KURSTIN: GREAT ART GRAVITATES TOWARD GIZMOS THAT JUST BECAME OBSOLETE.

languish in museums. Instead, thereminists suddenly have their own annual convention, just like oboists and tuba players, plus a rising cadre of virtuosi in all styles.

Many of those virtuosi would have appeared last week in Portland, Maine, at Theremin Fest '99, but it was postponed (see <http://www.137.com/wooo>). Two of them, however, made New York news anyway: Lydia Kavina, whose CD *Music From the Ether* is just out (Mode); and Pamela Kurstin, who played with keyboardist Greg Kurstin and drummer Brian Dewan at *Tonic*, following a screening of Steven M. Martin's moving documentary about the theremin's inventor, *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey*. Kavina is the granddaughter of Leon Theremin's cousin, and a photo in the liner notes shows her at the age of nine studying the instrument with her great-uncle. Pamela Kurstin is the first jazz thereminist I'd heard, and the contrast between the two proves that the box's potential is richer than we once believed.

Music From the Ether is nicely divided between historic theremin works—from the 1930s and '40s and recent music, most of the latter by Kavina herself. If you expect either creepy space-age effects or sentimental

by the Brazilian Jorge Antunes, while in *Voice of Theremin*, Vladimir Komarov deliberately spins some old-timey theremin clichés around a recording of Theremin's own voice as Kavina plays Glinka's "Skylark," the tune with which he demonstrated the instrument for Lenin in 1922. With a few exceptions, the disc is remarkably listenable and non-gimmicky.

Pamela Kurstin, who played bass before studying the theremin, did not match Kavina's perfectionism of pitch in the set of somewhat new-agey jazz pieces her trio played. But she pulled off a credible rendition of Gershwin's "Our Love Is Here To Stay," spun arabesques around jazz harmonies with a lithe and sure touch, and—most impressively—had developed such subtle dynamic control with her left hand that she could make the theremin exactly imitate a walking string bass. (Standing in the back of the crowded club, I craned my neck in every direction to see where her bass player was.) And when Greg Kurstin started playing a theremin sound on his synthesizer as Pamela accompanied him with a roving bass line, the illusionism became just too bizarre. That was the moment I realized that the theremin is here to stay whether our love is or not. ▣

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