

Music Notes: sampler in a sea of sounds

The wind chill is 50 below in Moorhead, Minnesota. Sick of fighting it, Henry Gwiazda is cooped up inside, playing baby gurgles and bird tweeps. Gwiazda's music has the momentum of rock, the soaring guitar gestures of jazz. The sounds, though, are an aural zoo of non sequiturs: a rooster crows, car horns honk, engines turn over, theater organs flourish, lions roar, a laugh machine chuckles, drums bop along. The texture is thick, constantly in transition, but Gwiazda performs alone, armed with guitar, tape player, and his instrument of choice: the sampler.

For those who've been wearing earplugs the last five years, the sampler is a box of digital circuitry that can record any sound in the world and play it back at any pitch level, slow it down, speed it up, splinter it, even play it backwards. The box has spawned a new type of virtuoso and a new conception of music, a music in which exotic timbres and the mundane noises of everyday life mingle with melodies and chords. Most commercial musicians use the sampler only to create an ersatz string orchestra for a fraction of the cost of a real one, but a number of composers have been exploring the box's more surreal potential. In this realm, Gwiazda is carving a niche as one of the most subtle and inventive of samplerists.

What most distinguishes Gwiazda's music is its wealth of sounds, the intricacy of his timbral mosaic. "I have to prerecord some of the layers of sounds," he explains, "because I change sounds more rapidly than the instrument can physically handle. As it is, I'm loading almost constantly. I take the weird sounds no one wants from the music store, like glass breaking. I enjoy using them not only in one piece, but in several pieces, and link my pieces together by using one sound in several works. In my mind, each sound is a different musical idea. It's interesting to me how a different context makes a weird noise reusable again."

Take keePingtHechilDalive (Gwiazda likes to run the words of his titles together and throw in eccentric capitalization). Within its five minutes it contains the sounds of a creaking chair, snoring, a telephone, an alarm clock, twittering sparrows, squawking crows, ocean roars, electric bass samples, transposed guitar, percussion, a harp, a gong, a tam-tam crescendo, a piano, a virtual fugue of kung fu shouts, and various baby samples: coughing, crying, babbling. "And I'm probably leaving a couple out. I use at least 30 samples in each piece. It's the opposite approach of taking one sound and milking it. It's diving into an ocean of sounds and trying to make sense out of it."

Gwiazda's musical strategy is to divide his ocean into categories: "I have my domestic sounds, my musical sounds, my outside/environmental sounds, and my percussion sounds. I introduce the sounds all at once, and as the piece progresses I spend time with each category, letting the listener understand where each sound comes from. And I spend some time with each sound because I like the sounds." It's an engaging formula; all hell breaks loose at the beginning of each piece, but almost without the listener realizing it, the sounds settle into pastoral calm before the end. You can tell Gwiazda loves to savor each timbre. Lately, though, his music is moving away from this pattern.



Henry Gwiazda

"Subconsciously I probably still think that way, but I don't do it literally any more. Wherever the music wants to go, I go."

Gwiazda started out playing in garage bands in his native Connecticut, then got an intensive classical training at three of the biggies: Eastman, Hartt College, and Cincinnati College Conservatory. He's played New Music America '89, New York's Knitting Factory and P.S. 122, San Francisco's New Langton Arts, Minneapolis's Walker Art Center, and Holland's Het Apollohuis. "I've had a lot of uptown training, but in a way my music's come full circle, for rhythmically it's still connected to rock. Gesturally, and phrasing-wise, I'm as influenced by the rock/funk/pop thing as I am by classical structures. I used to contrast the classical with the rock, but I gradually just merged them."

One direction Gwiazda no longer pursues is quotation of other people's riffs, which has gotten several rap groups and a couple of composers in legal trouble. In the most visible art-music case, Toronto composer John Oswald had to destroy the remaining 300 copies of his *Plunderphonics* CD because of copyright problems over his sampling of Michael Jackson's album *Bad*. Gwiazda once wrote an homage piece entitled *James Brownesque*, but he now feels uncomfortable sampling other people's CDs. "From an artistic standpoint, if you're trying to use a James Brown scream and make money from it without people recognizing that it's a James Brown scream, that's one thing. But recognizability is exactly the point in my music."

Digital buffs may want to learn that Gwiazda's personal instrument is an Ensoniq EPS, which he likes for its rapid access capability and because he's found it equal to almost everything he's tried. But his work succeeds because he puts aesthetic concerns before technical ones. "There are a lot of people just working with what the technology will do. I like to think, 'What do I want to do?' and then make the damn thing do it. What interests me is the juxtaposition of various sounds, which feels right for the world we live in. But it's the chicken-or-the-egg argument: if the sampler hadn't been invented, I wouldn't be doing this."

"The encouraging thing is, when I played on New Music America, I saw a bunch of people using samplers, and I thought, 'Oh boy, we're all going to sound the same.' Like when the Yamaha DX-7 [synthesizer] came out, and everybody could say, oh, that's a DX-7. But everyone's music sounded entirely different. And I came away encouraged, because I thought: here, finally, is an **instrument**. Because there are no presets [in samplers as there are in synthesizers], you have to decide what sounds you want to use, and that makes it individualistic. It opens up a new world of doing things that people like Busoni and Varese only dreamed about. It's better than tape, because I can punch the sound in in the exact position and pitch level where I want it. That's important for personal expression." Few techno-whizzes have a personal expression as quirky and playful as Gwiazda's. That child he's keeping alive is the one inside himself.

Henry Gwiazda will perform at Club Lower Links, 954 W. Newport, on Monday, February 11, at 8:30. Admission is \$6. For more info, call 248-6238.

—Kyle Gann

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