

Everyone has the same initial reaction to Music Mouse, a software program. I tapped the mouse and jumped when brilliant, harpsichord-tinged, string orchestra sonorities burst from the synthesizer (Yamaha TX 816) behind me. Roll the mouse one way, the chords slide in parallel; another way, they crisscross. Punch "U" or "I" and the orchestration changes; "A" (for "automate"), and the computer bounces lush chords in its own rhythmic patterns. I switched to the piano setting and mellowed into a perfect Keith Jarrett imitation; selected an atonal palette and pulled off a plausible late-Ligeti étude; punched in some gamelan sounds and automated my own Lou Harrison concerto. You're power-crazed on your first encounter, then you realize you have to slow down and get subtle to coax from Music Mouse your own personalized composition.

Music Mouse is the software-art creation of New York composer Laurie Spiegel, whose aim is to get music performance out of the concert hall and back into the living room where it belongs. Stick this floppy in your Macintosh, Atari ST, or Amiga, MIDI it up to whatever digital synthesizer you have lying around, and even if you can't tell a C# from a hole in the wall you can make computer music of considerable complexity. The program has been used in music therapy at Rikers Island and in Philadelphia with juvenile delinquents. Spiegel imagines her average audience, though, as "people who have huge record collections, whose ears are very sophisticated, but who were told they started too late to become musicians; they have the ear, they just don't have the training. Music Mouse starts you on the level of phrasing, tension, and resolution, rather than, 'Is this really the note I want?'"

Spiegel grew up in Chicago, not with the rich concert life New Yorkers take for granted, but with a guitar, lute, and mandolin on which she cultivated both folk

Laurie Spiegel

A Mouse That Roars

BY KYLE GANN

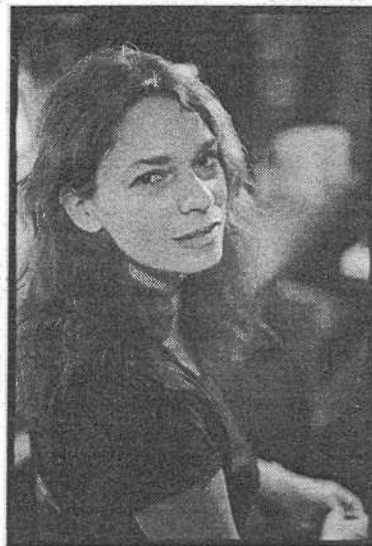
music and a strong philosophy of amateur performance. "I want to fill in a continuum," she says, "between totally passive listening—putting on a record and not having anything to do except play with the treble and bass controls—and a completely active performing experience

MUSIC

which requires a lot of training and skills." Music Mouse is designed to provide flexibility of style, from New Age prettiness to atonal Viennese angst. Still, she admits, "a certain moody expressiveness" is programmed in: "If I put my own compositional decision-making into a piece of software, and some musician interacts with it, it's still got a little of me in it."

Spiegel's odd status as on-disc collaborator has involved her in a legal battle symptomatic of the way music wreaks havoc with official categories. For two and a half years she's been bumped around the copyright division of the Library of Congress, and in May, the general consulate finally denied her a copyright, saying Music Mouse is neither a piece of music nor an audiovisual work. They've asked her to resubmit the print-out for the Music Mouse program as a text work. Spiegel admits that at some point Music Mouse existed as a linear text, "but that's like saying that Beethoven's *Fifth* once existed as a piece of graphite inside his pencil. I'd like some rights on output, design, and aesthetic contribution."

Electronic music has always given bu-



CAROLINE HOWARD

Spiegel: floppies for your Mac

reaucrats headaches. Prior to 1977, you couldn't copyright a work created directly on tape; you had to send in a score, however fictitious. Faced with a dilemma similar to Spiegel's, Joel Chadabe took a different route, patenting his Intelligent Music program as a software musical instrument; he feels the distinction between instrument and artistic product pivots around whether a listener would recognize the original programmer's contribution, which in the case of Music Mouse is a hazy question. Though often collaborative, rock and jazz manage to work within copyright guidelines because authorship is usually divided between only two to four people. The Macintosh version of Music Mouse, however, has

sold more than 6000 copies, the Amiga version around 1000 (the Atari just hit the market); and since the first version wasn't copy-protected, Spiegel estimates the number of her "collaborators" at well over 20,000 in America, Europe, and the Middle East.

Pros use Music Mouse too, especially rockers. Of those who've made albums with it, most have been kind enough to credit Spiegel, but she'd prefer to have some legal rights in the matter. Video games, she points out, are protected as intellectual property: "If someone makes a video of their PacMan output is considered as belonging to the makers of the video game, regardless of what action sequence comes out on the screen. It's an inconsistency. Music Mouse isn't a neutral, general-purpose tool like a word processor. It would be like a word processor that said, here are some characters, here are some scenes, some plot lines, the rest is up to the user."

Spiegel says she hates to make copyright a big deal, but music grants are geared almost exclusively for performance, never for research and development. As witness, she keeps the price (\$79.95) remarkably low for such sophisticated software, and claims that's why her previous distributor wouldn't push the product aggressively; in February she took over the job herself. Ultimately, Spiegel thinks the information revolution will topple the intellectual property system and the outmoded European model of a "genius-composer" writing music for a totally passive audience. Her brave new world looks like a digital remake of our pre-Classical past: she foresees a day when computer pieces will be like folk songs, anonymous common property to be altered by each person who toys with them. In the meantime, aren't you glad our artists keep confusing our government?

Music Mouse is available through Aesthetic Engineering, 175 Duane Street, New York, N.Y. 10013-3309. ■

TOWER RECORDS | VIDEO

SEE THE
ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND



The Hudson River Museum of Westchester
presents

SUMMER