

Boogying to the Max

TUESDAY, JUNE 18, 2002 AT 4 A.M.



Hans Tammen strikes his guitar to create random-noise continua.

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Max/MSP is a world of its own. It's a software program, or set of programs, that hundreds of composers are using, to the extent that you can say many of them are Max composers, the way Chopin was a piano composer or Nancarrow a player-piano composer. Students have demonstrated it for me, and I sort of get it. There are all these boxes containing numbers or pitches, and you draw lines between them, so that the same data can control melodic curve, loudness, rhythmic attacks, any number of phenomena. Max runs MIDI instruments like synthesizers, while the MSP part handles actual signal processing, so that you can play around with audio samples in real time. (I couldn't have told you this much without some help from my sound engineer friend Bob Bielecke.) And Max/MSP was the pervasive background of the June 1 concert at Engine 27, which brought together Dafna Naphtali, Bruce Gremo, and Hans Tammen.

You remember Engine 27: After starting off with a bang doing sound installations two years ago, they went pretty much inactive after the 9-11 tragedy a few blocks away, and have just resumed. The peculiarity of the space is that it's a long, narrow hall dotted with a variety of custom-made loudspeakers all over the place, creating a temptation, almost a mandate, to make music that

twists and curves through space. And the peculiarity of this concert was that these three electronic artists have developed ways to control location in space via Max/MSP.

And so we in the audience had noises and notes bouncing around our heads. Gremo played flute and shakuhachi, Tammen maltreated a guitar, and Naphtali ushered in chords and drones on a tiny keyboard, occasionally wailing into a microphone. Gremo and Tammen had Macintosh G3 laptops open, which I observe lately seems to be the computer of choice in avant-garde music circles. (Max/MSP isn't available for IBM because Windows is too cumbersome.) The three complemented each other; it would be oversimplifying yet partly true to say that Gremo provided logic, Tammen texture, and Naphtali atmosphere. Flutist Gremo was largely forced into a soloistic role, though his flute triggered concomitant noises that scampered away from him like freed mice. Naphtali, with her rich underlying and often wavery drones, showed a tendency to resolve into more consonant chords by the end of each piece, while Tammen's frantic operations, hitting his guitar with batons and small cymbals, tended toward unchanging random-noise continua.

We were urged, before the concert started, to move around so we could experience the different loudspeakers in space. I dutifully did so, and found I was having more fun sitting still. Since there was a speaker about 20 feet to my right, another down low eight feet past that, and still another near the ceiling 10 feet past that, I frequently sensed noises rushing off into the distance, sometimes to have them suddenly reappear 12 feet to my left. Sounds didn't appear to move continuously, but rather leaped from speaker to speaker like electrons. Tammen would pluck wildly but silently at his guitar strings, and after a moment's delay a thousand plinks would sweep through the cavelike room. Low, whale-like moans would turn out to be Naphtali, pitch-shifting her voice down several octaves.

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Each of the three played a solo, sandwiched in among trios. The first trio was exciting, with Gremo inciting streams of clicks, and Naphtali's rocking glissandos making the whole ambience a little seasick. The second was a plethora of ephemeral noises, swarming around Naphtali's haunting if aimless vocalese. But by the third and fourth the sets started blurring together, the spatiality began to pale in titillation, and the audience, I thought, began getting that "Uh, haven't we already heard this tonight?" look on its collective face.

That strikes me as still a difficult sandbar to steer clear of with Max/MSP and similar computer musics that generate scads of notes via algorithms; moments of strong detail are very rare, and the mass textures become hard to distinguish from each other upon further exploration. But while Tammen rattled things on his guitar with the kind of casual randomness that I quickly get tired of in improvisation, Naphtali and Gremo showed a musical sensitivity in trying to sculpt memorable moments, and crested what is probably as high a summit as anyone's reached in this admittedly slippery sound environment.

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