KYLE GANN

Freeze, Symphony!

D'ya ever try to make love while wearing an old-fashioned deep-sea diving outfit? I haven't, but I've been trying to get my new-music fix off the Internet these days, and I suspect the experiences are analogous. I tripled my RAM at Christmas and downloaded huge audio software programs, each upgraded weekly these days, so now at last I can receive music over the Web—though it still comes in fragments and spurts, with eons of time for finger drumming. Seems like all I have to do is imagine something that might be interesting to download, lift an eyebrow involuntarily, and my screen freezes solid.

The experience I've been aiming for past this Himalaya of virtual obstacles is William Duckworth's *Cathedral*, an ambitious and gradually accumulative Internet experience. (You'll find it at www.monroestreet.com/cathedral.)
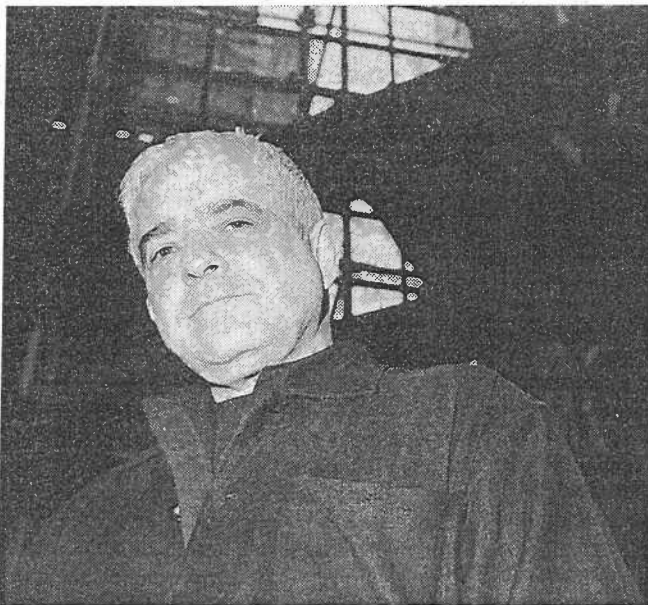
Millennialist William Duckworth

Cathedral, which will eventually be tied into live performances climaxing at the dawn of the new millennium (2001, not 2000), is a celebration of the Web as mystical apotheosis, with focuses on five decisive points in human spiritual history: the building of the great pyramids, the groundbreaking for Chartres Cathedral, the inception of the Native American Ghost Dance religion, the detonation of the first atomic bomb, and the founding of the World Wide Web. Duckworth, known till now for smooth postminimal works such as *The Time Curve Preludes*, went online with the piece at precisely 12:34 a.m. last June 10—an astrologically propitious moment—and has been adding features month by month.

Enter the current *Cathedral* and you get your choice of four destinations, called Codex, Nostradamus, Mandala, and Sound Pool. Codex is the text room, flashing a series of sayings by mystics throughout recorded history, some of them referring to millennial prophecies and others presciently to the Web. My favorite is a 1951 quote from shamus/mystic Alice Bailey: "At present a pattern of squares is the major construction of the web, but this is slowly changing as the divine plan works out." She must have been reading Bill Gates's mind. Codex also offers one of the longer musical seg-

ments, actually a synthesized version of a section from Duckworth's charming recent orchestral work, *Mysterious Numbers*. The other big musical number is the jaunty virtual-percussion piece heard in Nostradamus.

Mandala and Sound Pool are interactive. Electromusic buffs can send their MIDI files to the Sound Pool, to be incorporated into a contrapuntal collage. The music here is triggered by clicking on nodes in a growing web of multicolored geometric patterns. Go slowly, or the web too quickly turns into an indistinguishable morass—perhaps that's a metaphor for the whole cultural phenomenon. Not all of the nodes trigger melodies; nor, in Mandala, a network of complex circular designs, does every click bring music. Duckworth, a longtime Cage associate, is into chance and mystery, and the site is intended to make you hunt for the keys to its operation.

Eventually, *Cathedral* will be much more involved, and would be now except that Duckworth's ahead of the technology. By last June, the maximum uninterrupted music-plus-video you could put on a Web site was 58 seconds. By October, he and his programmer/wife Nora Farrell had managed to up that to two minutes, 12 seconds. He originally created the sound files on Director 6, but Director 6 will only play one audio file at a time, so a couple of weeks ago he switched to Beatnik, which will supposedly stream several audio files at once, though not all the bugs are out. Despite the hurdles, Duckworth's are the first entire pieces I've downloaded off the Net, and as such give a vivid glimpse of what our CD-less future is supposed to be like.

The other interactive site I've been playing with is *Web Phases* by John Maxwell Hobbs, which appeared this month at www. artswire. org/jmax/phaseframe.html. Hobbs, late on the staff at the Kitchen, offers 13 audio files for you to mix and match any four at a time. You choose from rock and reggae beats, drones, bells, free jazzy but tonal piano phrases, and blend to suit in loops too long and complex to be perceived as repetitive. I let Hobbs's mix run through my stereo speakers for a while, adding and subtracting elements, and enjoyed listening to his gritty Make Your Own Muzak recipe, as mellow or obnoxious as you want it to be.

Would that I had similar control over the Web itself. I got Netscape so confused I had to reinstall it, and the words "waiting for reply" are now enough to send me to bed with a cold compress. Nevertheless, *Cathedral* and *Web Phases* operate on a noticeably higher artistic level than the earliest tape-music pieces by Pierre Schaeffer and Otto Luening, or even more the earliest computer-music snippets by Max Mathews and Newman Guttman. This time, it's the reception technology that's clunky, not the origination technology, and the potential for social reorientation is even more incredible. Decades hence, we'll look back and say 1998 was the year our relationship to music entered a new era. ▼