

# Handmade in Holland

*Steim's Installations Turn Motion Into Music*

By Kyle Gann

**AMSTERDAM**—Continental drift has rendered this eastern New York suburb regrettably inconvenient for day trips. Nevertheless, Amsterdam absorbs (and sometimes anticipates) New York's innovations with a shorter lag time than any other European city, shooting them back to us with a refreshing Dutch spin. Looking at rows of red three-flats crammed along the Amstel River, I thought, "This isn't so exotic, it looks like the West Village." Then I remembered who settled the West Village. And at the Steim festival at the Theater De Balie October 22 through 24, I could have sworn I was back at the Kitchen. Except that Amsterdam's new-music spaces, *mirabile dictu*, contain cafés with full bars. You get to the concert an hour early, enjoy a bite, hear some music, sip cappuccino at intermission, hear more music, and down rich steins of Bokbier in the lobby until the wee hours as you argue about what you've heard. What an elegantly civilized musical existence.

If you divide Europe between the young old farts who are still determined to make 12-tone music work (the French, Germans, and English) and the bland imitators of American minimalism (the Italians, Hungarians, and Swiss), Holland stands boldly aloof from either camp. Dutch musicians have trouble pinpointing a musical heritage more recent than Sweelinck (d. 1621), and Dutch composers aren't allowed to assume leadership in Europe the



Fits like a glove: Michel Waisvisz models his instrument.

were too complex for anyone to give me ballpark percentages.

Amsterdam's "Downtown" centers around a thorny little outsider, Steim—an electronic music studio devoted, unusually among such European institutions, to

lodic nuance. The inner methodology of such a music, with its roots in serialism, could only have arisen in Europe. The performance practice is straight out of New York.

Steim's festival "De Zoete-

noise samples by tapping the floor with shoes wired to a box on her belt, interposed her own tale. Sonami is sultry and magical, Goyette brash and funny; the two styles never gelled, but their counterpoint drew a dynamic tension be-

and the Dutch experiments tended to lag far behind such American sampler virtuosi as Henry Gwiazda. Soniam Mutsaerts (I missed her at Amsterdam, but caught her two days later at Groningen) loaded her sampler to the gills with two-second bits of talking and pop music, then improvised a viscous and rather crude collage. The Ground Zero trio took collage into a rock context, sometimes drumming in unison with a looped spoken phrase, or layering primeval bird cries and explosions over bowed guitar. My criterion for this music tends to be that, since the language is so diffuse, the sonic images need to be especially memorable. In this respect New York's Impossible Music (David Weinstein and Tim Spelios) produced vivid moments with CD players, including the repetitious poing of a ping-pong game, themes from two Beethoven quartets in uneasy counterpoint, and an announcer's comforting reassurance that "there is nothing wrong with your television," repeating ad infinitum as the music died.

The more exciting works, philosophically if not always musically, were the installations. *Waisvisz's Web*, a hexagonal spiderweb of wires and metal strain gauges was set up in the theater lobby. Twanging the wires elicited tones, squeezing them warped the timbre. Upstairs, Bob Van Baarda's *The Singing Lightning*, a six-foot copper coil surrounded by neon tubes and an enormous wire net, shot off miniature lightning bolts accompanied by booming tones that commanded the crowd's undivided attention. Besides illustrating theories of Nikola Tesla, the piece reportedly wreaked havoc with computer systems in neighboring buildings. In Tom Demeyer's *Big Eye*, a video camera translated the onlooker's movements into noises, and Wais-

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cal heritage more recent than Sweelinck (d. 1621), and Dutch composers aren't allowed to assume leadership in Europe the way the Cubs aren't allowed to win the pennant. But with the recent prominence of Louis Andriessen, backed up by a whole roster of composers arguably as good—Otto Ketting, Ton de Leeuw, Peter Schat—Holland sounds more attractive these days than its neighbors. Ignoring Schoenberg in favor of Stravinsky and Messiaen, the Dutch post-minimalists of the '70s were using rhythmic and textural devices that Americans are just now reinventing. That realization becomes public every year through the New York-Amsterdam axis at the Bang on a Can festival. You think Pierre Boulez and Wolfgang Rihm are going to admit that the Dutch have zipped 30 years ahead of them musically? *Bonne chance.*

And that's just the *Uptown* scene. The critic for the weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Jacqueline Oskamp (my Dutch counterpart, if she's not too depressed by the comparison), loves reminding me that there's no real Uptown/Downtown polarity here; not because philosophical differences don't exist, but because, at least until now, there's always been enough government money to go around. A composer (or for that matter, even a rock band) is funded not *instead* of his or her colleagues, but in addition to them. Cash flow makes a big difference in one's tolerance of aesthetic diversity. Dutch musicians, however, are pessimistic. As in England, the government has begun cutting way back on arts money, though life funding tiers and schedules

ters around a thorny little outsider, Steim—an electronic music studio devoted, unusually among such European institutions, to live-performed electronic music. Often filthy with Americans, it has, for the last year, been under the artistic direction of New Yorker Nic Collins, who gave me a tour. The building houses recording studios, a performance space, individual studios for the use of invited musicians-in-residence, and a couple of workshops where instruments can be manufactured to artists' specifications. Most fascinatingly, Collins shows me a computer out of which run dozens of wires attachable with velcro to switches, levers, joysticks, and other mechanical paraphernalia. By mixing and matching such components the composer can construct a prototype of any electronic instrument he or she can imagine, later to be built in more durable form.

Well, almost any. Steim's guardian genius in recent years is Michel Waisvisz, the only Dutch composer of his generation working in live, improvisatory electronics rather than the more usual European taped-and-scored variety. Waisvisz is famous (in America, too) for his digitized gloves, which, cabled to a computer, allow him to command a rich array of quasi-orchestral textures and dramatic gestures. Thus, the hand gesture has infiltrated Steim's aesthetic as a guiding metaphor. Instead of being controlled by a 12-tone row, the various parameters of sound—pitch, dynamics, timbre—are diverted via the bend of a finger, the flick of a button, the tilt of a palm. The slightest movement in space translates into me-

ant, interposed her own tale. Sonami is sultry and magical, Goyette brash and funny; the two styles never gelled, but their counterpoint drew a dynamic tension between striking talents.

Steim's festival "De Zoetgevooisde Bliksem" (The Sweet Voice of Lightning) alternated between Waisviszian hand controls and New York-style sampler-collage mixology. The gloves' handprints were everywhere. Ray Edgar played his "Sweatstick," a phallic, bendable bar wired with sensors. Conjuring up now macho, now delicate sonorities, he created a smoother flow than in his Kitchen gig of last year, and one in which Waisvisz's influence was clearly audible. In *The Effect of Noise on the Sleep of Children*, Joel Ryan (Steim's research director) bowed a long, loose, amplified wire while percussionist Paul Koek drew noise patterns from digitized virtual drums. The limitation of hand music is that hand gestures don't have as wide a rhythmic vocabulary as you'd think: they slide, they jump, but they rarely pulse or shimmer. Only Koek fully overcame this limitation, for percussionists' hands are trained for complexity.

Laetitia Sonami's glove was an electrified lace one, which this San Francisco-based French woman played by gently waving her hand. She collaborated with Marie Goyette on *Manananggal: Women Soignees*, a theater piece with a deliciously ambiguous text by Melody-Summer Carnahan. "My mouth embodies luxury," breathed Sonami's seductive French accent. "Stories flow out like a bobbin unwinding. For her it's not so." And later, "She exercises a practiced mystery. I abandoned that style years ago." Meanwhile Goyette, drawing

collage by moving a mouse through a computer diagram. In a funny way, these pieces directed behavior without limiting freedom. *Big Eye* taught you to move quickly if you wanted sonic results; *Music Tree* only responded to slow, gradual gestures. Democratic and noncoercive, sound installations can induce people to move gracefully.

This was the most fertile ground for Steim's peculiar techno-revolution. Ron Kuivila performed on his *Civil Defense* installation, a subtle system of video-triggered noise layers which, had he had enough setup time, was intended to be triggered by passersby. New York merged the composer with the performer 25 years ago, but Steim's installations threaten to merge the performer with the audience. Imagine a world in which every soft and subtle motion is translated into sound. Imagine a new type of composer, whose responsibility is to ensure that the music responds in a satisfying, detailed way to the initiatives of the listeners. (As Collins's *Sound for Picture* showed, the output can be both pretty and unified regardless of the input.) The din that made these intermissions often livelier than the concerts gave us an eerie feeling, not that we were being watched, but that we were being listened to. The performer of the music of the future, dear reader, will be yourself. And the elegant democracy of that idea has a nicely Dutch flavor.

As for Waisvisz himself, usually so portentously dramatic, his *Partly Unplugged* was a hilarious theater piece of a type ubiquitous in the '70s, unknown in recent years. Moniek Toebosch, a powerhouse soprano and amazingly good sport, stalked into Waisvisz's ensemble carrying a microphone stand upside down to amplify her footsteps. She silently mouthed a climactic aria as her glisses and cries actually emanated from Goyette's sampler. Waisvisz waved his computerized gloves to bring a chaos of noises down on her, until she ended the performance (and put out the lights) by a supremely metaphorical gesture, jerking the main electrical cord out of its plug. Dutch music often has a weird self-satirical quality, as does recent Dutch visual art. Guus Janseen's harpsichord solos are bizarre parodies of the Baroque suite, and John van't Slot has painted strange scenes of a moose throwing up, or an artist's palette being hurled out of a cottage window.

The mix-and-match sampling piece is a new genre for Europe,

neighboring buildings. In Tom Demeyer's *Big Eye*, a video camera translated the onlooker's movements into noises, and Waisvisz's *Music Tree* allowed listeners to construct their own digital collage by moving a mouse through a computer diagram. In a funny way, these pieces directed behavior without limiting freedom. *Big Eye* taught you to move quickly if you wanted sonic results; *Music Tree* only responded to slow, gradual gestures. Democratic and noncoercive, sound installations can induce people to move gracefully.

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