

**SAN FRANCISCO ELECTRONIC
MUSIC FESTIVAL 2004**
SAN FRANCISCO SOMAARTS
CULTURAL CENTER

USA

BY RICHARD HENDERSON

Long ago, before the world was shingled with aluminium discs, it was somewhat easier to determine what was, and was not, electronic music. Any attempt, then or now, to define a musical genre by the implements of its creation represents an invitation to step into the thorn bush of semantics. A genre whose Venn diagram perimeter encircles tape manipulation, sounds generated by analogue, digital or virtual oscillators, processing of acoustic signals and performance art – to name but a few accepted strategies within 'electronic music' – is likely to prove thornier than most.

So all the more credit to San Francisco's Pamela Z, herself an electronic musician and performance artist, for mounting the fifth instalment of the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, her ongoing investigation into the past, present and future of a form that, owing to its own amorphous contours, is nearly impossible to pin down. Though not possible to ignore. As evidenced by the pot of fluorescent earplugs thoughtfully provided at the ticket counter, electronic music retains the ability to jar and

physically intimidate its audience in a manner largely absent from rock.

Over three nights at SomaArts, the festival offered a catholic purview of both time-honoured and nascent avenues of electronic expression, with both pioneers and recent renegades namechecked. Of the former, Ramon Sender, one of the founders of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, offered *KORE*, an invocation of the mythic figure Persephone. He invited the audience to participate in a communal chant as his tape-piece (abetted live by boy soprano Radj Eaton) unspooled. A last minute addition of iTunes's Visualizer graphic component sat uncomfortably with Sender's otherwise contemplative reworking of piano timbres and improvised vocals, yielding unintentional product placement for Apple (and audience laughter) as a familiar logo materialised amid evolving colour fields.

More than a little grating is the current paradigm for live presentation of electronic compositions: composer/performer hunched over laptop, mixing board and unruly gorgon's coiffure of wiring, resisting both direct communication with the audience and evidence of physical effort in generating sound, not to mention exhibiting profound horror vacui (fear of silence, as ethnographers define the condition musically) in the ongoing gush of mutating and

mostly atonal timbres. In direct and most welcomed defiance of this too common posture stood Joan Jeanrenaud, still best known for her tenure as cellist with Kronos Quartet. Hers was an affable and articulate presence, standing next to her custom electric cello, an amp and the minimum of outboard gear essential to the sonic processing and spontaneous loop generation central to the two pieces she played. Silence is a rhythm too, as The Slits once sang. Judging from her finely nuanced recital, Jeanrenaud understands this on a molecular level.

Guitarists were among representatives of the electroacoustic spectrum, most notably through Christopher Willits, whose agitated improvisation played out like a hopped-up, glitch enhanced iteration of 'infinite guitarist' Michael Brook's performances from the early 90s. Willits's mastery of radical shifts in tone colour and the fact of his being, at root level, a great guitarist capable of leading audiences wherever his muse will next lead, are both commendable.

The festival's master stroke of sequencing paid off in spades on the final night. Jon Irving sprayed finely sculpted shards of sound gleaned from field recordings against a projected backdrop of desert imagery mirrored into fearful symmetry (as Northrop Frye once described William Blake's view of nature). Their

collaboration was a most apt preamble to the festival's final set featuring Ikue Mori. Initially known as the drummer powering the feral ensemble DNA during the heady No New York era, she has since earned regard for her singular employ of linked drum machines as tools of improvisation. She, too, has moved into the virtual realm of laptop composition, yet has escaped the taint of solipsism seemingly endemic to that sphere of activity.

Her extended, untitled effort utilised live control of both sound streams – some characteristically beat-oriented, but many offering sinewy, sensuous alternatives to the strict intonation generated by keyboards – and projected imagery. As she married her thoughtful soundscapes to altered macro-photography of ants at work, it was easy to imagine her set as a musical rendition of JH Fabre's *Souvenirs Entomologiques*. Later, digitally diced Javanese shadow puppets danced to her music in ways their creators could never have imagined, but doubtless would have enjoyed. The whole piece was so engrossing that, by its end, the audience was nearly traumatised by the sound of an object inadvertently dropped offstage. Here, at the cusp of disappearing natural and folkloric worlds and an ever more virtual existence, sits Ikue Mori, calmly pointing toward the future. □

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