

A CELEBRATION OF THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Sunday, February 22, 2009 3:00 pm

Desert Ambulance: "A vehicle of mercy sent into the wasteland of (academic) modern music"

PROGRAM

Tony Martin and Ramon Sender, *Desert Ambulance* (1964)

Pauline Oliveros, accordion
Tony Martin, visual performance

James Fei, *Faktura* (2002, revised 2008)

for two alto saxophones and electronics
Aram Shelton, alto saxophone
Jacob Zimmerman, alto saxophone
James Fei, live electronics

Maggi Payne, *Liquid Amber* (2008)

INTERMISSION

John Bischoff, *Audio Combine* (2008)

Chris Brown, *Imaginary Birds* (2008) world premiere

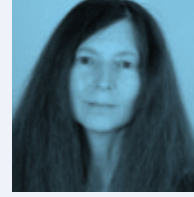
Joan Jeanrenaud, cello
William Winant, percussion
Chris Brown, piano and computer

The Center for Contemporary Music (CCM) presents a concert of electronic music and intermedia that celebrates its pioneering role in the development of electronic music since its origins as the San Francisco Tape Music Center in the '60s. Beginning as a cooperative exploring uses of taped sounds in music composition, the CCM has, for more than 40 years, been a home to composers whose experiments with new technologies have become part of the history of new performance practice. The CCM is clearly alive and kicking, demonstrating passionate innovation combined with an enviable sense of continuity.

The concert takes its title from one of the classic works to emerge from the San Francisco Tape Music Center, which later became the Center for Contemporary Music after it moved to Mills in 1966. Ramon Sender's piece for accordion, tape, and visual projections will be performed by Pauline Oliveros and Tony Martin, for and by whom it was created in 1964, along with new video, interactive, and live electronic works by current CCM faculty members. James Fei's *Faktura*, for two alto saxophones and electronics, uses solely those elements usually considered undesirable in both acoustic and electronic sound production, the "dirty bits," like the dust in a room. Maggi Payne's video *Liquid Amber* is about images that compel one to want to reach out and touch them in real life and on screen. Almost all of the sounds are produced by touching skin, fabric, wood, metal, and water. John Bischoff's *Audio Combine* is a real-time sonic collage performed by a solo artist on a laptop computer which samples, amplifies, and transforms the sounds of small objects based on the timing patterns of their initial occurrence. Finally, Chris Brown's *Imaginary Birds* is about the relationship of nature to human artifice; computer-driven models of singing birds interact with a trio of stellar Mills performers—William Winant on percussion, Joan Jeanrenaud on cello, and Brown on piano—improvising on themes from the score of Olivier Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*.

This event also celebrates the publication of distinguished Mills musicologist David Bernstein's seminal history, *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*. This authoritative account of an extraordinary era in Bay Area history was hailed on its publication in 2008 as "vibrantly detailed," "high-voltage history," and "as warm as it is brilliant." In the memorable words of Fred Turner: "Reading it is like visiting a foreign country and realizing you were born there."

Desert Ambulance (1964) was composed for Pauline Oliveros. The source tapes were created on a Chamberlin Music Master and then synched to a score that I'd dictated onto tape for the accordionist to hear over earphones. This allowed her to perform in semi-darkness, so that the projections could be seen. *Desert Ambulance* was taken on the Tape Music Center tour that same summer, and over time has received more performances than any other piece of mine. The name derives from a marvelous photograph of a missionary ambulance, vintage 1928, that I found thrown away on the street. Some 30 years later, I was able to relate it to the French Red Cross ambulance that evacuated me and my sister to Bayonne from Civil War Spain in



1936, and whose looks must have imprinted themselves in my two-year-old brain as impressive. At the time of its first performance, I described the piece as “a vehicle of mercy sent into the wasteland of (academic) modern music.” —Ramon Sender

I created the visual composition for *Desert Ambulance* using the cross-fading of a sequence of hand-painted 2” x 2” slides and also a 16mm animated, collaged, and painted film which supplies the illumination and visual transformation of the performer. This combined light and image projection gradually grows in size, making a continually changing environment that finally fills the entire stage. The changing, evolving, visual experience resonates metaphorically with the performer’s presence and the overall sound experience. —Tony Martin

I loved performing *Desert Ambulance*. I did more than 25 performances in the ‘60s and a few revivals in later years, including the performance in the San Francisco Tape Music Center retrospective “*Wow & Flutter*.” Here are a couple of performance highlights: Once, the output to my headphones was mistakenly sent to the audience speakers and my amplified playing was fed into my headphones. Performing in the dark with Tony’s film and projections playing on me and my white lab coat was a pleasurable situation. I only played without the film and projections once. It was very difficult to perform without the visuals—they were so well-integrated into the piece, I vowed never to do that again. —Pauline Oliveros

Faktura (2002, revised 2008), for idling electronics with two alto saxophones, is from a series of works utilizing solely those elements usually considered undesirable in sound production. These dirty bits, like the dust in a room, are usually masked and overcome with instrumental technique, but remain present nonetheless. The electronic setup in *Faktura* is limited to a mixer and filters with nothing plugged in, their hiss and switch noises manipulated with the existing faders and switches. Likewise, the two saxophones are played with a range of restricted airflow without fully sounding, their conical bores articulated as acoustic filters. —James Fei

Liquid Amber’s (2008) images and sounds are about texture-images that compel me to physically reach out and touch them in real life and on screen, just as I am drawn to reach up to try to touch a star in the desert’s black velvet night sky. The sounds are physical, tactile, and visceral as well, produced by my touching various objects (skin, fabric, wood,

metal, water, etc.). There are only a few exceptions, as when I used synchronized sound in the fast water sequences. When I shot those scenes, the spray of the water on my face and tumultuous sound were so very physical that the images still conjure those sensations for me. There is a faint voice on occasion—vocal cords set into vibration by air.

This is not an attempt to add sound effects to the visuals, although certainly many sounds relate directly to the images. But the perspective is intentionally skewed as these images have great depth with layers that change in texture, so certain sounds detail the surfaces, others reflect the images’ deep interiors. The images are of nature or illustrate nature’s effects on man-made objects, such as a sheet of copper and an old ship. The title derives from the Liquid Amber tree that provided the ending for this work. —Maggi Payne

Audio Combine (2008) is a solo electroacoustic work for sound-making objects and laptop. As the objects are activated, the resulting sounds are amplified, colored, and recycled in fragmented form based on the timing patterns of their initial occurrence. As more sounds are made, more layers of fragmentation are generated on top of one another. One can think of the piece as the real-time construction of a sonic collage which is different in each performance because the performer’s interaction with the objects is always different. As the collage gains momentum, synthetic resonances shadow the fragments and eventually overtake them. —John Bischoff

Imaginary Birds (2008) Messiaen’s *Oiseaux exotiques*, a composition for piano and small orchestra from 1956, is composed of melodic material derived entirely from his transcriptions of the songs of 47 species of birds from Asia, South and North America, and the Canary Islands. Messiaen’s transcriptions are remarkably faithful to the recorded sources, but the whole idea of translating the sounds of birds’ voices to European orchestral instruments, with their tempered tunings, range of sounding materials and timbres, and sheer amplitude, produces a kind of fantasy world populated by hyper-real, artificial birds.

I made this piece to extend Messiaen’s nature-inspired project one step further; I arranged his themes from 11 of these birds for a trio of piano, cello, and percussion, who are to improvise freely with them, holding roughly to the order in which they appear in Messiaen’s score. I then wrote a computer program that listens to the musicians’ improvisations, and generates real-time synthesized responses to them. But with the electronic birds, I am able to imitate more accurately the timbres and tuning flexibility of the birds themselves, and to make them “fly” around the performance space as they sing. So my intention is to make a piece that is at once more artificial, in its use of computers as sound-sources and as improvisers, but that is also closer to our natural impulse to listen to, and to play music with, the birds. —Chris Brown

