

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Fine Mesh of Speech and the Senses

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By Thomas Goss

Vocal Art — the term covers the broadest expanse of human expression, yet can pull the most diverse of artistic endeavors into a tight definition. It can imply communion among a comedian, a singer, a storyteller and a sound-effects specialist. And it's the best way to define the principles driving the latest installment of the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival. In "Electric Words," an aptly titled series which ran for six nights over the past two weeks, a collection of mostly local heavyweights presented their electronic take on the process of spoken language as art.

The closing performance Saturday night presented four musical minds as perfectly matched in quality as they were individual in imagination. Dean Santomieri's dreamlike recitation, *A book bound in red buckram . . .* would have worked as well on radio as on stage. His chilling, circular tale of a descent into madness and alienation was punctuated by random electronic scrapes against a video backdrop of slowly shifting abstract shapes. The elements cohered as the character in the story became the calmly seated narrator himself, pondering on his own mortality while a crackling fireplace emerged from the story to take its place on the screen. All that was missing was for the text he was reading to become the book itself.

For all its intellectual sophistication, there is a breezy quality of innocence to Charles Amirkhanian's works. Perhaps it's in his capacity to charm as well as innovate, most prevalent in a sure-to-become-a-classic *Marathon*, presented here by the composer with Amy X Neuburg as his left-hand echo. Despite skilful, clever performance, the stereo separation in the tiny room failed to provide the proper effect for this piece or its follow-up, *Dutiful Ducks*. His soundtrack to the abstract video *Im Frühling* by his partner-in-life-and-art, Carol Law, was symphonic in its creation of thematic textures with birdsongs and development of natural sounds as texture.

Laptop magic

Eric Lyon's *Second Skin* was a reinforcement of the image of the modern-day electronic composer as an earnest wizard. He sat alone on a stage, hunched over a laptop computer, his only tool for creating sonic sorcery. In this case, the vocal art was a rambling, cutely foul-mouthed recitation by the composer's kid sister, twisted and harmonized and modulated out of all comprehensibility. Far from being a mere demonstration of the capabilities of sound-processing software (which is where much of this music can end up), this was a well-proportioned construction. It had layers of meaning as well as sound and a developing sense of direction. The payoff came at the end where the full recitation was heard clearly, the textural distortions and fragments floating around it like supporting instruments.

Amy X Neuburg was at her best that night, bouncing looped "You're welcome's" off of host Pamela Z's electronic "Thank you's," doing stand-up comedy with her electronics gear as straight man, and turning the whole mood on its head with tender sadness. In the field of vocal art, Neuburg showed perhaps the most well-rounded talent of the evening, equally gifted in singing, orating, cutting up, or making weird sounds. A comparative Luddite, her stacks of gear hulked next to the trim laptops of her fellow electronic composers. Yet she manipulated it with an interactive physical ease that seemed no less kinesthetic than the approach of a concert pianist and would have been lost on a PowerBook.

Not everything worked that night. Venue 9, for all the commitment of its staff, still seemed cramped and unpleasantly hot, and had little of the space necessary for the appropriate psychoacoustics. As capable and fascinating a hostess as Pamela Z can be, her moderating only increased the length of the program from uncomfortable to almost unbearable, particularly in the oxygen-depleted room. However, the performers pushed the right buttons and were far less self-indulgent than in previous festivals. This was performance art with a focus on the pleasure of the audience no less than the composer-performer, brought home at the end with a participatory crowd composition of electronic words and sounds. *Zzzzap!* Kilowatt! Ohmm! *Zzzing!*