

ORCHESTRA FOR TWO MUSICIANS

In Bowerbird's "Sound Machines" project, two people work a marvel of an instrument.

By David Patrick Stearns
FOR THE INQUIRER

The cluster of musical instruments seems to stretch as far as the eye can see, both down the room and up to the ceiling. They're pointed every which way, and played in a way that suggests the world forgot what they are and how they usually work.

Timpani is played by a rolling pin with spikes. A trombone slide is equipped with a mallet that hits a xylophone. A horn has a Hindustani tabla drum stuffed in its bell; it's both blown and tapped.

Rather than having a bow play a cello, the cello — strapped to a rocking chair, swaying back and forth — plays the bow.

The piece is Mauricio Kagel's *Zwei Mann Orchester* ("Two-Man Band"), heard last week in the first of a series of "Sound Machines" performances in the

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Andy Thierauf, one of the two musicians who will work the "Sound Machines" device, rehearses at the URBN Annex in West Phila. SYDNEY SCHAEFER / Staff

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Pearlstein Gallery at Drexel University's URBN Annex.

The two performers, percussionists Ashley Tini and Andy Thierauf, never move from their seats, at opposite ends of the hall. They produce music mostly by remote control, often setting sound in motion by pulling a string whose color matches their clothes.

In a sense, they're largely operators who just start balls rattling up and down the keys of the xylophone, leaving the rest to gravity, chance, and any number of random forces out there.

Instruments scavenged from pawnshops and antiques stores have been mated with the least-likely household objects for performances of the 50-minute piece. The opening-night audience was left slack jawed. The sounds themselves are more familiar than strange, but the sound machine itself is a marvel.

"It's so stupid, I love it," said project mastermind Dustin Hurt during one late-night rehearsal while finding ways to make sound according to the composer's open-ended requirements. Then, another time: "That's dumb, but perfect."

Complicated, costly

Though Hurt has produced major festivals of John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Julius Eastman, the "Sound Machines" project is the single most complicated and costly (at least \$50,000) in the history of Bowerbird, his presenting and producing organization. It's also the craziest.

Kagel, who died in 2008, was associated with Dada-ists and the Theater of the Absurd (along with more furrow-browed post-war modernists), especially in this 1973 piece. The work is kind of like the Haydn-era *Toy Symphony* — and maybe in the same ballpark as the *Symphony for Broken Instruments* that David Lang premiered in Philadelphia last year.

Seated tickets (\$15) for the performances are selling out — this is only the fourth version in the piece's history — but there are



Ashley Tini rehearses at URBN Annex. The instruments are worked by pulling strings. SYDNEY SCHAEFER / Staff

free, standing room spots, too (with reservation), plus the delight of being able to visit the 210-instrument sculpture during regular gallery hours through May 31.

Hearing it was a singular experience. For all its outward complexity, the piece isn't some conceptual experiment that produces cacophony. Soundwise, it's a kind of Noah's Ark, with the sounds coming out in pairs or trios.

And visually, for all of the hazardness, little was left up to

chance on Thursday. The two performers had worked out what they were going to do — seemingly directed by a series of small, white note pages taped up around their respective lairs. "They're secret memos," said Tini.

What do they say? "They're secret," she said with an enigmatic smile.

'Have I got a job for you!'

Building the sound machine was a singular experience for the

Andy Thierauf rehearses. The 210-instrument sculpture is available for public viewing during regular gallery hours through May 31.

six-person assemblage team, and it's an interesting crew.

What sort of musicians do you hire for self-created instruments? Answer: Percussionists, although none of them are exclusively involved in concert music. Tini has studied ethnomusicology — and is an astrologer. Thierauf teaches at Settlement Music School but is also a sound designer.

The building and development side included Neil Feather from Baltimore, who has a long history of creating instruments out of bicycles and bowling balls, for organizations such as BalletX.

Another builder, Temple Ph.D. candidate in psychology Yona Davidson, was wrapping up his doctoral residency in Alaska's Bering Straits when Hurt phoned to say, "Have I got a job for you?"

Davidson also works on the ongoing restoration of the famous Wanamaker Organ at Macy's, as does "Sound Machines" collaborator Scott Kip — who in addition is a visual artist, creating "allegor-

CONCERT

Sound Machines

Zwei Mann Orchester

performances at 7 p.m. May 13, 17, 20, and 24, Pearlstein Gallery, URBN Annex, 3401 Filbert St. \$15 (standing room tickets free). Gallery hours: Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. bowerbird.org or drexel.edu/pearlsteingallery

ical installations inspired by perception of time."

At least three builders at a time typically worked 14 to 15 hours a day for four months to get it built. "Can we do this?" was an ongoing question, said Feather.

Hurt's role, amid some of the wilder flights of imagination, was often to reel them in from the ozone.

Some instruments were eccentric upon arrival. One guitar found in a Philadelphia pawnshop has two necks on each side of its body. Was this built for human beings or space aliens? The best theory is that the instrument allows the performer to flip it over for easy segues from one tuning to another.

The score, which Hurt came across in the University of Pennsylvania library, is more like a series of tasks whose solutions are left up to whomever is interpreting them. For instance: "Each performer must at first arrange their plan of action ... it is absolutely necessary that the final use of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic modes is settled only gradually over the course of shared rehearsals."

In the end, is it a performance? A demonstration? Does it produce music? Or just sound?

The "Sound Machines" crew doesn't like to take sides, but when forced to comes down on the side of performance and music. Hurt, though, points out that even though the percussionists can't be called actors, they're part of the theater of *Zwei Mann Orchester*.

For lack of any better description, how about "serious absurdity"?

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