

## WLT AUTHOR FACTS

AUTHOR Warren Burt (b. 1949)

COUNTRY United States/Australia

PRINCIPAL GENRES Composing, Filmmaking



# EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC IN 2005

WARREN BURT



Warren Burt

**T**HIS IS A MUSIC COMPOSER'S TALE OF CHANGING SOCIAL CONDITIONS—the decline of some communities and the possible growth of others. Composers of music, despite the mythologies, have always been intensely linked to their societies, and their activities are always influenced by the opportunities available. (Bach didn't write for a rock band, nor Duke Ellington for a Japanese gagaku orchestra.) In the past few decades, the social circumstances of what is called new music have changed. There has been a worldwide decline of live musical performance at all levels, from the rock band in the pub to classical chamber music. Economic pressures have made live performance a more and more endangered activity. In fact, economic factors have come to utterly dominate the whole of society, including the international music scene. As the Australian composer/improviser Jon Rose recently observed, only fifty years ago in some Australian aboriginal communities the most important person was the songman, who kept the entire oral culture of the tribe alive. Today, the most important person in society is the accountant. Neither Jon nor I feel this change has been a good thing. In fact, we feel it has led to a serious erosion of the moral, philosophical, intellectual, and aesthetic values that underlie the larger society and the more specialized production of new music. Consequently, for creative people, there has been a serious decline in the notion of "community"—that is, the group for whom a creator immediately and personally makes a new work. (The notion that a group of record purchasers could be an adequate substitute for an interactive, engaged community is an example of the misleading thought the domination of economics has occasioned.) Of late, I've been searching for a different set of social conditions for my music-making—both composing and performing.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Warren Burt, and since 1968 I've been a composer and performer of what some have called experimental, or exploratory, music. Although I was trained in traditional



chamber and orchestral music as well as electronic music, circumstances have led me to make most of my music with computers, synthesizers, and homemade acoustic and electronic instruments. Occasionally, I still write a piece for traditional instruments when asked to do so, but for the most part, I was early and happily seduced by musical electronics and the things I could do with them. I quickly realized that the exploration of new musical resources was the musical activity that most interested me.

Recently, my composing has become long-distance. I don't mean that in the old sense—of a composer writing a piece and then waiting for performers to play it—but in a different sense, in that I'm making music in my studio and, through technological means, the music is happening elsewhere, sometimes delayed, and sometimes in real time. I'm no Luddite. I know that technology is absolutely essential to the art I create. But I, and a number of friends, have been searching for a way of using this technology to make new senses of community—in fact, to forge new communities.

In contrast to the notion that one should be constantly expanding one's market, I've been trying to reestablish a sense of community by radically reducing the size of my audience. The sense of personal community I'm interested in is built one person at a time, not through media tools of mass persuasion. A number of my musical activities, therefore, have been aimed at creating a sense of intimate, one-on-one communication with small, sometimes invited audiences. For example, my most recent live performance on an acoustic instrument—a performance of my hour-long composition "The Malleable Urn," for quarter-tone baritone ukulele—took place at Gallery East, in Sydney, in November 2004. Several dozen people visited the gallery that afternoon, viewing the art, but those who stayed and listened numbered four, three of whom were friends, and one of whom has since become a friend. Some might be

dismayed by this extreme personalization of music-making. I prefer to be enthusiastic at the chance to perform in such a personal and intimate manner (the absolute antithesis of stadium rock).

I've also extended this idea to encompass the notion of performing for an audience of one, the ultimate in personal musical contact. One of the ways I like to compose is to set up a process in which I and my computer programming both make decisions at the moment of performance. Various people have referred to this approach as interactive composition (i.e., using the computer as an improvising partner); it's been one of my chief musical interests. In April–May 2004 I made a piece ("And Pterodactyls Danced in Dewsbury") that involved improvisation by me and my computer program.

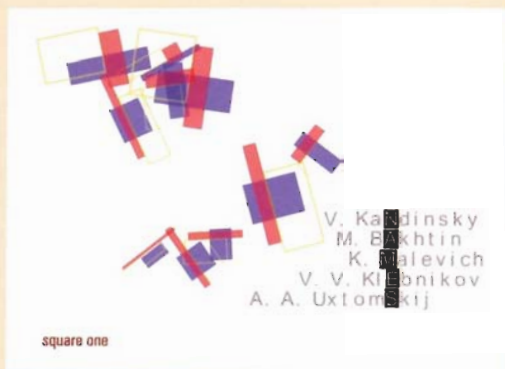
This meant that each performance of the piece would be unique, or at least have unique elements. I performed live in my studio, making a different performance for each of ten friends, recorded the results, and then mailed each their version. Given that the friends I wished to perform for were scattered all over the planet, this was about as personal as my music-making could get. Eventually, the e-mails and letters I received in reply were filled with as much (and often more) gratifying and detailed feedback as I

would have received during almost any live performance.

I've mostly used the Internet as a means of rapid communication. The potential exists for it to be used as a remote performance device, but so far issues of speed and reliability have mostly thwarted these. The idea of "performing at a distance" goes right back to the start of electronic music. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Thaddeus Cahill proposed live concerts on his one-of-a-kind "telharmonium" to be piped by telephone lines to interested listeners. On a more modest level, in the early 1970s I remember when a friend in London and I connected our synthesizers to our telephones for an intercontinental jam. One of the most sophisticated examples of this



Nora Farrell and Bill Duckworth



Names, by Daniel Weisenfeld

Source: cathedral.monroestreet.com

kind of "action at a distance" (if we may borrow a term from quantum physics) is the *Cathedral* project of William Duckworth. *Cathedral* has many manifestations. It is not a single work or even a work with multiple, slightly differing versions. *Cathedral* exists as a website, as a series of live performances (often with radically differing personnel), and as a series of interactive computer instruments. One of these instruments is the Pitchweb, which allows performers over the Internet to select from a precomposed vocabulary of about five hundred sounds, arrange icons for these sounds in various positions on a performance screen, and perform by playing them singly or in multiple combinations.

Further, during performances by the Cathedral Band, performers from around the world are invited to play the Pitchweb live, and bits of these web performances are mixed into the simultaneous live performance. Recently, the Cathedral Band gave a performance at the World Financial Center in New York City. My wife, Catherine Schieve (who is also a composer), and I took part in this performance from our work rooms at home on the east coast of Australia. We both played Pitchweb, as did several other people in other parts of the world, while at the WFC a live band that included William Duckworth on computers (playing his own expanded version of the Pitchweb), webmeister Nora Farrell (mixing the web input from the multiple web-based Pitchweb players), trombonist Stuart Dempster, keyboardist "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and several others performed. From our end, the performance was filled with technical difficulties and was more frustrating than rewarding. Catherine's computer had some difficulty with the plugins that run the Pitchweb, and we were frustrated at the inability to hear the live New York performance simultaneously with our performing—we were unable to respond to what they were doing. At the moment, it really does feel like "flying blind" or, in this case, deaf. However, the idea of distance performing is a good one, and when we later received the CD of the event, we were both pleased to hear that a few moments of our



malfunction-plagued presentation actually did make it into the final mix. The situation with *Cathedral* and Pitchweb is embryonic—each new performance brings up new problems and engenders new solutions. I have no doubt that,

within a few years, technical problems will be sorted out, and *Cathedral* will incorporate a true, rewarding two-way interactive performance between centrally located and remote performers.

One of my most interesting recent projects has been composing for live performances by robot instruments. These have been occurring in Ghent, Belgium, and in Paris, under the auspices of Godfried-Willem Raes and the Logos Foundation, and the French composer/systems organizer Jerome Joy. At the Logos Foundation in Ghent, composer/instrument-maker Raes has

been building an orchestra of musical automats, giant constructions which enable a computer to control acoustic instruments. Starting off with a computer-controlled player piano, Raes quickly developed an entire orchestra of organs, xylophones, bells, musical saws, and, most recently, a tuba and an accordion. For each instrument, Raes enjoys the challenges of figuring out how to get machines to emulate the physical gestures of human performance and then how to go beyond them. In December 2003 Catherine and I visited the Logos Foundation



"Tubi," a quarter-tone automated tubophone, premiered at the M&M concert at the Logos Tetrahedron on May 8, 2003

and were mightily impressed with the sheer physicality of these instruments. An arrangement of some selections from Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale" for the instruments practically knocked us out of our seats, both with its musicality and its hilarity. Godfried pointed out that all the instruments were controlled by MIDI, which is the by-now twenty-year-old computer standard that allows electronic musical instruments to communicate with one

another. This meant that almost anyone with a computer could compose for these instruments, and Godfried extended an open invitation to us to compose for this orchestra. Since I'm interested in microtonality—the use of musical scales other than the normal Western twelve-note scale—and some of the instruments use microtonal scales, I thought this would be a good idea. Kristof Lauwers, Logos's master of these machines, sent me recordings of the



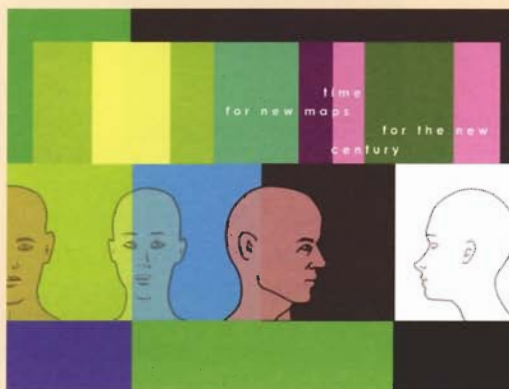
"Belly," Godfried-Willem Raes's programmable automated brass carillon with thirty-four bells

instruments I was interested in: Belly, a computer-controlled carillon (tuned to a random, found-object scale), and Tubi, a computer-controlled tubular metallophone (tuned in quarter tones).

I then proceeded to compose for these instruments, as well as for the player piano, and e-mailed the resulting MIDI files to Kristof. He used my files to play the machines, recorded the results, and sent the recordings back to me. I heard these recordings, made revisions, and sent the completed files back to him. These pieces were then performed at the monthly M&M concerts given at the Logos Foundation's concert hall in Ghent. M&M (Man and Machines) is an ensemble, led by Raes, that interacts live with these marvelous robots. As a relief from the energy of live performance, remotely composed pieces for the robots, such as mine, are played between the live pieces. What I miss in this process, so far, is the physical presence of these often very large instruments. No recording, however good, can give one that sense. I'm hopeful, however, that I will be able to travel back to Logos in the coming year and interact in real time with the machines, and learn more about their charming and idiosyncratic behavior.

The French composer/event-organizer Jerome Joy is another person who has been concerned with building musical communities and with alternative forms of making music accessible. His "Collective Jukebox" project (started in 1996) involved building a jukebox that could play recordings by experimental musicians from around the world. He then asked people all over the planet to contribute recordings and to let their friends and acquaintances know about his open invitation. He did not curate the recordings; rather, he included everything that was sent to him. He wanted to create a kind of musical "commons," where information from anyone who wanted to participate would be available. The jukebox has been installed in a series of art museums around Europe for the past eight years, where its music is available for the public to hear and explore.

As a further extension of this project, he is now working on making the contents of the jukebox available on the Internet. Again, he wants to create a place where people who are interested in listening to newer forms of sonic creativity can easily find that work. His most recent project was a concert in Paris, as part of the Paris Autumn Festival, the "Compatible/Downloadable Concert." This was a concert of works composed for the Yamaha Disklavier, a computer-controlled



New Maps, by Daniel Weisenfeld

Source: cathedral.monroestreet.com

grand piano. He invited a number of composers to send in MIDI files of newly composed or already existing works for the Disklavier. He made a selection from these, and the works were performed on December 6, 2004. My composition, "Probable Occurrences, in Layers," was performed. Jerome then made the files of the pieces from the concert available on the Internet so that interested people could download them and play with them on their home comput-

ers. In a recent e-mail, Jerome said to me that he was delighted with the concert itself, which challenged a number of aspects of the normal concert (watching a piano with no performer, the playing of works beyond the capabilities of a human performer, et cetera). Rather than eliminating the notion of live performance, here he had the best of both worlds—for the audience in Paris, the experience of the roaring physicality of the Disklavier at full tilt (at least that's what "Probable Occurrences" is about!), and, for the worldwide audience, the ability to take the pieces and play them (or even remix and modify them) at home. Joy's work is another example of a composer trying to establish a new basis for musical and artistic community, and I, for one, enjoy participating in his projects.

In searching for new forms of musical community, I don't think we're there yet. For me, the two most important aspects of music are its physicality (and here we also include the physicality of sound coming out of a loudspeaker, even or especially soft sound) and its moments of face-to-face musical and personal communication. E-mail and letters are not good substitutes for conversation. Recordings are a different experience than live performance. Nevertheless, these projects are a start, and through the use of these often maddeningly inadequate new technologies, we are at least beginning to establish a new sense of both international and local community for our music-making. **WLT**

University of Wollongong

#### REFERENCES

- Chadabe, Joel. *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997.
- Weidenaar, Reynold. *Magic Music from the Telharmonium*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1995.
- Jerome Joy's website: [homestudio.thing.net](http://homestudio.thing.net)
- Logos Foundation website: [www.logosfoundation.org](http://www.logosfoundation.org)
- William Duckworth's *Cathedral* website: [cathedral.monroestreet.com](http://cathedral.monroestreet.com)