Richardson Auditorium
May 16, 2009
8 pm

The Princeton Laptop Orchestra

Sō Percussion

Maimos

Tickets through the University Ticket Office (609) 258-5000
Presented by the Lewis Center and Music Department at Princeton University
The Department of Music at Princeton and the Lewis Center for the Creative and Performing Arts present:

The Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk)
Directed by Dan Trueman and Perry Cook
Associate Director Scott Smallwood
Assistant Directors Michael Early and Rebecca Fiebrink

with special guests:
Matmos
So Percussion
Riley Lee

~Program~

Autopoetics
Blinky
with Riley Lee, shakuhachi
Kindness
Ganzfeld in Orange and Black
laptop instruments created by members of PLOrk
Bells and Whistles
with Riley Lee, shakuhachi

~Intermission~

Beepsh
Boomdinger
Ceramic Song
laptop instruments created by Dan Trueman
Inlayers
Supreme Balloon
laptop instruments created by Scott Smallwood
Founded in 2005 by Dan Trueman and Perry Cook, the Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk) reinvents the traditional orchestra for the 21st century with each musician performing with a laptop and custom designed hemispherical speaker. PLOrk has worked with guest performers and composers, including Zakir Hussain, Pauline Oliveros and others and has inspired the formation of other laptop orchestras across the world, from Oslo to Bangkok. In its short lifetime, PLOrk has been presented by Carnegie Hall, The Kitchen, the American Academy of Sciences, and has been awarded a major grant by the MacArthur Foundation.

Matmos is M.C. Schmidt and Drew Daniel, aided and abetted by many others. Over the last nine years, the duo’s recordings have utilized the sounds liposuction surgery, field recordings of conversations in hot tubs, the sound of a frozen stream thawing in the sun and countless other sources. Dr. Drew Daniel is a professor of English Literature at Johns Hopkins University and M.C. Schmidt is a housewife and record store janitor in Baltimore, Maryland.

So Percussion formed at the Yale School of Music. Since then, the percussion ensemble comprised of Eric Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski and Jason Treuting have developed a repertoire that runs the gamut from Steve Reich’s Drumming, to new commissions, including David Lang’s the so-called laws of nature, to original music, including group member Jason Treuting’s Amid the Noise. So Percussion has performed across the United States, with concerts at the Lincoln Center Festival, Carnegie Hall, Stanford Lively Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, in addition to recent tours in Russia, Australia, Italy, Spain, Germany and the Ukraine.

Riley Lee began playing the shakuhachi (bamboo flute) in Japan in 1971, studying with Chikhuo Sakai until 1980, and has been a student of Katsuya Yokoyama since 1984. He was given the rank of Dai Shihan (grand master) in 1980. Lee’s studies with traditional teachers in Japan have included such peculiar methods as practicing barefoot in the snow, blowing into his flute under waterfalls and in blizzards until icicles form at its end, and running the Boston Marathon and then playing taiko drums at the finish line. He has made over 50 commercially released recordings since 1980, which are sold worldwide on a number of labels.

Program Notes:

Autopoiesis I (2009)
The title, literally ‘self-making’, refers not over-strictly to the strict definition by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, as well as to an adapted use offered by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. In the initial version of the piece, the ensemble worked together to form and perpetually reform a sole, shared sequence of sound events. Every member of PLOrk could create, modify, delete, or change the order of these events at any time, and determine how the sequence was traversed. Result: a gross, notably unsatisfying species of chaos. The next version proceeded from my [flawed] perception that the problem was too much activity on the part of the players. Thus players were invited [‘compelled’], during the course of the piece, to vote on a variety of things all of which limited their capacity to act. It turns out this is not an enjoyable application of democracy. The next version multiplied the number of available sequences to four and introduced simultaneous streams, that is, the possibility of sounding more than one sequence at a time, counterpoint. Allowing a little tweaking that’s, happily, where we are now. Among the more important of these tweaks: (1) groups of three players address themselves steadfastly [if I may participate in reclaiming that excellent word for humans] to a particular sequence for the duration of the piece; (2) about half of the ensemble is involved in another process all together—that of providing a dynamic textural ground. With more attentive design of constraints, with refinement of the environment or medium in which the autopoietic machine lives, that machine’s speech has assumed a more specific character. Still, the piece is an ‘open work’, and probably more devoted to its system—or poetics—than to its musical success. To hedge against that often annoying situation, some of its materials are somewhat lovely. And no doubt the process in general may afford some stellar moments—originating from choices made by the players. Where there are moments it doesn’t sound good and so isn’t good, the fault is definitely mine. It is a great and rare treat to work with PLOrk, a completely unique medium that forces completely unique considerations. Many, deeply sincere thanks to the players, directors and especially Dan for patient guidance and support.

Blinky
The musical: Air, light, sound, movement. Computer music can be beautiful (we hope). The technical: The shakuhachi player creates sound with breath, setting the air column of the instrument in vibration. The laptop players create sound with light, which is captured by the computers’ built-in webcams and then analyzed by a pattern recognition algorithm.
Kindness
When performers are given a simple instrument and can see what everyone else is playing, beautiful harmony is a piece of cake.

Ganzfeld in Orange and Black
Over the past two years, we have been re-enacting a famous parapsychological experiment known as the “Ganzfeld” experiment, which is designed to supposedly provide a scientifically verifiable way to test subjects for ESP. In order to induce a simple state of sensory deprivation, our test subjects are isolated in a dark room, resting on a mattress, listening to white noise on headphones placed over their ears and wearing halved ping-pong balls over their eyes, with a soft red light shining in their faces. At a set signal, they are asked to “open their minds” and try to receive a psychic signal that I attempt to send from my mind into their mind. I try to transmit a “musical idea” entirely with my mind and the test subject is asked to describe any sounds they “hear” in their minds, and to describe any objects or actions or events that they seem to see or hear. In Ganzfeld in Orange and Black, the results of these re-enactments are used as the raw material from which to create music collectively. Transcripts of the images and actions that emerged during the psychic transmissions are divided into three categories: sound making objects, timbral/textural ideas, and formal musical ideas. These lists were presented to the members of PLOrk, and each member was asked to construct a series of “sonic events” that would realize the images, sounds and ideas generated during the psychic experiments. Participants were encouraged to treat the lists as modular and re-combine and fuse various components: to map a timbral idea onto an object, or express a musical idea and a timbral idea simultaneously. For this performance, we will use a Ganzfeld session videotaped at St. John’s College, Oxford as a graphic score and “lead vocal”, and in concert with this pre-recorded participant I will conduct the members of PLOrk. The goal is to create a real-time form of musique concrète, a spontaneous assemblage out of their collective responses to the transcripts of psychic phenomena.

Bells and Whistles
The exciting thing about making music for PLOrk has been the lack of established tradition and the new possibilities that it allows; and the most terrifying thing about making music for PLOrk has been the lack of established tradition and the new possibilities that it allows ... I’m used to making music with instruments that have an established mechanical connection between the physicality of the instrument and the sound produced. With laptops, we can make this association almost anything we want – so the big challenge for me has been trying to find fun and interesting ways to engage the players with the sounds coming out of their laptop instruments – in the same way we take pleasure in striking a bell, or blowing a whistle. I would also like to thank Riley Lee for lending his prodigious musical sensitivity, skill, and discipline to complement the laptops’ bells and whistles.

Beepsh
This piece turns the entire orchestra into a giant step-sequencer, with melody and rhythm being sent around the group endlessly in two separate streams. If you’re a player in this piece, you spend most of your time waiting for the sequences to get back around to you, giving you a space to step back and think about how you’d like to compose your next melodic or rhythmic unit. This strategy seems to make good use of the laptop orchestra as a configuration, since it’s designed to allow for the inherently slow reaction times of the traditional keyboard+trackpad interface.

Boomdinger
“What began as a piano improvisation has been transformed into a multimedia experience.”

Ceramic Song
Ceramic Song was written as a jumping off point for a recording session So and Matmos had a couple of summers ago. The version you will hear tonight has morphed and grown from that seed with the addition of Dan Trueman and PLOrk. It is an exploration of ceramic sounds, both acoustic and electronic, and comes in 3 connected parts.

Inlayers
Looping in music has a reputation as a relatively stagnant form of composition. Once a loop is created, it repeats itself ad nauseam. Inlayers uses looping software written as part of my senior thesis that aims to re-imagine the looper as a dynamic and interactive tool, a playground for performance and composition. The title comes from the artisans who meticulously craft pearl inlay patterns on string instruments, much as the members of PLOrk methodically assemble small loop fragments to create layers of sound. For more information on my thesis, visit: http://music.princeton.edu/~hammond/LiLo

Supreme Balloon began as an improvisation for arpeggiating synthesizers and electronic tabla, and quickly grew into an outsized homage to the classic era of late 70s/early 80s “space music” (Vangelis, Cluster, Tangerine Dream...). Our goal was to replicate the LP side length and gradually additive structure of this bygone era in electronic music.
Loosely speaking, such works are shaped like the psychoactive trips they were originally meant to accompany: music that comes on, peaks, and then slowly comes down. The goal is to explore synthetic texture and, in hearing only gradually dissolving and reforming versions of the “same” idea, to enter a hypnotic state. We are grateful for the opportunity to transform this work, which we have toured and played extensively as a duo, into an entirely different collective form for this concert. This new transformation was made possible thanks to the programming of Dan Trueman, Perry Cook and Scott Smallwood, and the larger PLOrk family. The video is by M. C. Schmidt.

Composer Biographies:

Jascha Narveson is in the second year of the graduate composition program at Princeton University. You can read more of his music here: http://www.jaschanarveson.com

Ted Coffey makes acoustic and electronic chamber music, multimedia pieces, interactive installations and songs. His work has been presented in concerts and festivals across the US and Canada, Europe and Asia. Coffey has performed with the Low Tones at Lincoln Center, and The Dust Bunny, a collaborative project with animator Grady Klein and composer Paul Lansky was released on the Ellipses Arts label’s OHM+ the early gurus of electronic music. In Open Space, Newton Armstrong described Coffey’s music as “subtle, weird and devoid of heroes. It’s the kind of music that resonates for days after you’ve heard it, and its spaces and gestures continue to form into new and extraordinary geometries.” Coffey’s writing on the aesthetics and social politics of transmissive networks in art have been honored with significant awards from the Josephine De Kármán and Andrew C. Mellon Foundations. He studied composition with a pantheon of composers at Dartmouth, Mills College and Princeton, from which he received his Ph.D. in 2005. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia, where he teaches courses in composition, music technologies, critical theory and pop.

Jason Treuting enjoys writing music for anyone who will play it. That has included So Percussion, Matmos, QQQ, Alligator Eats Fish, janus, Tarab Cello Octet, the NOW Ensemble and Big Farm. This recent collaboration with PLOrk has allowed for the addition of laptop orchestra to that list.

N. Cameron Britt and Sean Friar are second-year students in the graduate composition program at Princeton. Currently on the cusp of international recognition, their music has been heard by over two thousand people combined on MySpace. Boomdinger is their first collaboration as well as their first PLOrk piece. For more information, please visit them at www.ncameronbritt.com and www.seanfriar.com.

Michael Early is a graduate student in music composition at Princeton, and has very much enjoyed all of the craziness working with the students and directors of PLOrk this semester. Many thanks to you all!

Michael Hammond is a senior music major from Jackson, TN. He was a member of the inaugural PLOrk seminar during his freshman year and has had many incredible experiences working with the group these past four years. Next year, Michael plans to continue hacking and playing, unfortunately without a laptop orchestra at his disposal.

With great power comes great responsibility, which is why Tom Lieber spends most of his time playing Tetris and reading blogs. He almost completes every task he sets his mind to. When asked for a bio for this program he replied, “Mu,” which he claimed to have read in a really smart-sounding book. When Tom grows up, he will be a programmer just like his hero Charles Babbage.

Rebecca Fiebrink is a PhD student studying real-time application of machine learning to music analysis and creation. She is also a classical flutist, and her favorite cheese is smoked gruyere.

PLOrk 2009 Members:

Abend, Thomas
Alderis, Justin
Beers, Theo
Bourque, Alex
Britt, Cameron
Cerqueira, Mark
Chou, Kevin
Cook, Perry
Early, Michael
Fiebrink, Rebecca
Fox, Adam
Friar, Sean
Grasso, Julianne
Gross, Andrew
Haas, Brittany
Hammond, Michael
Keeler, Timothy
Kim, Steven
Kwok, Adrian
Laskey, Kevin

Lieber, Thomas
Murphy, Sean
Narveson, Jascha
Peters, Niklas
Popov, Theodor
Silverman, Ross
Smallwood, Scott
Trueman, Dan
Weintraub, Andrew
Weitekamp, Raymond
Zhang, Alice
PLOrk wishes to extend a special thanks and honorary membership to Lawrence McIntyre of the School for Engineering and Applied Sciences at Princeton; Larry constructed each and every one of the beautiful brushed aluminum enclosures that we use for our speakers. Thanks Larry! We are also sad to see Scott Smallwood leave after several years in a lead development, teaching, and composition role with PLOrk, including this past year when he oversaw our most recent development push as a postdoctoral researcher funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Scott is leaving to take a faculty position at the University of Alberta. ALOrk?

The Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk) has received generous funding from the MacArthur Foundation: the David Gardner ’69 Magic Fund; and the Princeton University Redistribution Initiative, Council on Science and Technology, School for Engineering and Applied Science, and the Department of Music.

Upcoming Department of Music Events:

Tuesday, May 19
Musical Marathon II
McAlpin Rehearsal Hall, 2:00 p.m.

Thursday, May 21
Musical Marathon III
McAlpin Rehearsal Hall, 1:00 p.m.

Wednesday, May 27
Senior Recital
Sam Leachman ’09, ’cello
Taotao Liu ’09, piano
Works by Beethoven and Piazzolla
University Chapel, 7:00 p.m.

Richardson Auditorium Staff
Delia Vayansky, director
Jennifer Harper, assistant director
Gina Madore, assistant director
Christopher Gorzelnik, production supervisor
John Burton, production technician
Liz Lamber, production technician
Bill Pierce, production technician
James Allington, audio engineer
Mary Kemler, assistant director of University Ticketing
Sharon Maselli, ticket manager

Princeton University Department of Music
Steven Mackev, chair
Ernest Clark, concert coordinator
Marilyn Ham, department manager
Alexander Kass, technical director
Cynthia Masterson, office assistant
Gregory Smith, academic programs manager
Kyle Subramaniam, business manager
Joseph Vizzini, piano technician