



THE BAY CITIZEN

A Digital Touch in Eco Ensemble's New Season



Peg Skorpinski

An acoustic-electronic piano played its part in an Eco Ensemble rehearsal on Monday.
 By KEVIN BERGER
 Published: January 20, 2012

At the [Eco Ensemble's](#) rehearsal of a dynamic, mysterious piano concerto this week, a grand piano sat on center stage, playing itself.

The Bay Citizen
 NEWS/CULTURE/COMMUNITY

A nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization providing local coverage of the San Francisco Bay Area for The New York Times. To join the conversation about this article, go to baycitizen.org.

Connect With Us on Twitter

Follow @NYTNational for breaking news and headlines.

Twitter List: Reporters and Editors

The ghostly digital piano, driven by a computer, was surrounded by the 17-member ensemble, playing acoustic instruments. The piece, "Flow, Debris, Fall," represented a tussle between technology and humanity, according to the composer, [Edmund Campion](#), who is from Oakland.

"It's like the name of a city in a David Lynch movie," said Mr. Campion, 54, a kindly, slightly Lynchian character himself. "Have you been to Flow Debris Falls? I'm not sure you want to go there," he said, laughing. "I seek music that is hilarious, sublime, impossible, normal, rule-conforming and rule-breaking."

The Eco Ensemble, founded just a year ago by Mr. Campion, a music professor at the [University of California, Berkeley](#), and David Milnes, a conductor who is also a Cal music professor, is a dream team of local musicians who embody a new high point in the Bay Area's vibrant contemporary music scene. Their winter season begins Saturday at Hertz Hall with a performance of Mr. Campion's piano concerto and three works by contemporary French composers who have influenced him.

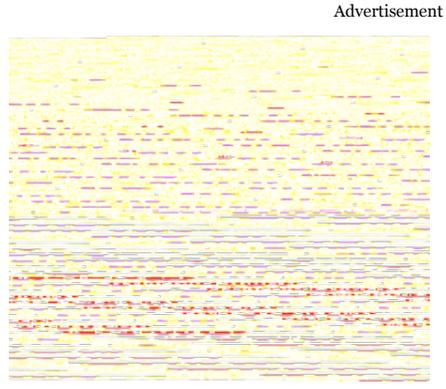
"You will be engulfed in a resonant and rich musical space that is always active, always

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com. [Log In With Facebook](#)
 Privacy Policy | What's This?

What's Popular Now

Spain to Seek Europe's Help in Rescuing Banks

Fight Isn't Over for Soldiers in Remote Afghanistan



RECOMMEND

TWITTER

LINKEDIN

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

LOLA VERSUS
WATCH TRAILER ▶

Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail



- | MOST E-MAILED | MOST VIEWED |
|---------------|--|
| | 1. Risky Rise of the Good-Grade Pill |
| | 2. CAMPAIGN STOPS How Racist Are We? Ask Google |
| | 3. OPINION Our Animal Natures |
| | 4. PAUL KRUGMAN Another Bank Bailout |
| | 5. THE STONE The Fallacy of the 'Hijacked Brain' |

alive," Mr. Campion said of the program.

The Bay Area has been a spawning ground of new music since the 1950s, when Modernist composers like Darius Milhaud set up shop at Mills College and had their works played on KPFA radio.

Something in the air ignited the creativity of two young composers, Terry Riley and Steve Reich, whose minimalist works, written when they lived here in the psychedelic era, are now part of the classical music canon.

In the '70s, the fertile musical landscape gave birth to John Adams, the renowned Berkeley composer, and the pied pipers of new music from around the world, the Kronos Quartet. Receptive audiences, too, have long given Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, license to program maverick composers like Lou Harrison alongside Tchaikovsky. Clearly, Mr. Campion said, the Eco Ensemble has evolved out of this rich musical soil.

What is new about the Eco Ensemble is both prosaic and divine. "There are, per capita, probably more new music groups and performances in the Bay Area than anywhere in the country," said Charles Amirkhanian, artistic and executive director of Other Minds, the venerable San Francisco concert series.

Most of those groups, like the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and sfSoundGroup, operate on shoestring budgets. The Eco Ensemble, on the other hand, is anchored at Berkeley, which allows the musicians to rehearse and perform in Hertz Hall. The ensemble is essentially the house band of the university's music department — where many of its members teach — and its Center for New Music and Audio Technologies, which provides technical support.

It is a house band, mind you, that contains some of the most talented and experienced players in the new-music world. They have played in orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony and the Berlin Philharmonic, and with artists like John Zorn and Bjork.

To keep such a high-caliber group, paid for each performance, together, Richard Andrews, the Eco Ensemble's executive director, said, "Our goal is to compensate the musicians as well or better than any comparable organization in the nation."

When Matias Tarnopolsky took over as director of Cal Performances, which is producing the concerts, two years ago, he was determined to promote living composers and build a new music series. "Sit with me for an hour and you'll discover an incredible new world of musical thought and expression that I bet you never knew existed," he said.

In February and March at Hertz Hall, the ensemble will show off stirring works by the Scandinavian composers Kaija Saariaho and Magnus Lindberg, the young New York composer Nico Muhly and Franck Bedrossian of Berkeley.

Mr. Milnes, who grew up playing jazz — and speaks in the breathless tones of a bebop hipster — said the ensemble was committed to sounds without borders. "We'll deal with music from Asia, South America, Europe. We want to blow your mind."

At the rehearsal of Mr. Campion's "Flow, Debris, Fall," the ensemble came close to doing just that. The simultaneously lyrical and percussive notes that emerged from the playerless piano were in fact being randomly generated, via carefully composed software, by the notes being played on another piano by Joanna Chao, the ensemble's virtuoso pianist.

It may have sounded at first like cacophony, but when the acoustic musicians and the Frankenstein piano began to harmonize and take flight, the effect was stunning. Mr. Campion seemed too preoccupied with fine tuning to appreciate his creation. But Mr. Milnes, who was hearing the synthesized accompaniment for the first time, grinned like a madman. "Let the games begin," he said.

kevinberger@gmail.com



6. OPINIONATOR
Are We Living in Sensory Overload or Sensory Poverty?



7. BILL KELLER
Wising Up to Facebook



8. Hospitals Aren't Waiting for Verdict on Health Care Law

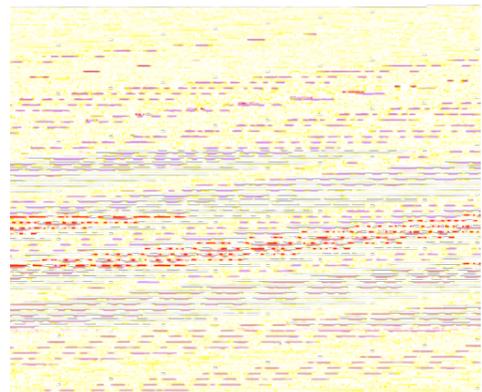


9. ON EDUCATION
Backtracking on Florida Exams Flunked by Many, Even an Educator

10. ARTSBEAT
'Mad Men' Creator Matthew Weiner Reflects on the Season So Far

[Go to Complete List »](#)

[Show My Recommendations](#)



ADVERTISEMENTS



Introducing Business Day Live - Watch Live at 10am E.T

INTRODUCING BusinessDayLive
CATCH IT DAILY. PROFIT DAILY.
nytimes.com WATCH LIVE 10:00 AM E.T. ▶

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

3 Symptoms Of Depression

The (3) Scariest Depression Signs

That May Be Hiding In Plain Sight.

encyclopediafactica.com