ICMC 2004
Reviewed by Douglas Geers

Introduction

The 30th International Computer Music Conference (ICMC) happened November 1-6, 2004 at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida. The conference was hosted and chaired by composer Colby Leider, and overall it was quite successful, featuring interesting, eclectic music programming and high quality papers and lectures. Kudos to the following selection chairs and all of their respective committee members for their extensive efforts and strong results: Colby Leider (conference chair), Paul Koonce (music selection chair), Kristine Burns (video/installation selection chair), and George Tzanetakis and Georg Essl (paper selection co-chairs).

This review will focus on the music of ICMC 2004. I found the papers and panels I attended to be quite interesting, but will not attempt to summarize them here—I will only encourage interested musicians to read the conference proceedings. Moreover, given the density of events, no one could possibly attend all of the ICMC. That fact and simple space limitations require that this review only touch on a portion of the music I heard; and thus I will offer some general reactions about the conference and then choose several concert highlights to discuss in detail. This unscientific approach will undoubtedly skip many worthy compositions, and for that I apologize in advance.

Location: Sunshine State

One benefit of holding the ICMC in Miami, Florida in November was the wonderful weather: It was nearly always sunny and warm but not too hot, and rain only interfered on the last two days. In addition, the scenery was resort-like, as the campus of the University of Miami is littered with palm trees and surrounds a peaceful little lake.

ICMC concerts happened both on campus at the Maurice Gusman Concert Hall and about a ten-minute drive from campus at the First United Methodist Church of Coral Gables, with free bus shuttle service to and from the church provided by ICMC. I must admit that it was unfortunate for procrastinators like me that so many concerts happened at the church, because although the bus service was well done, I missed the bus (and thus the associated concert) several times. I understand that logistics required a venue besides Gusman Concert Hall, and know that it isn't always easy to find quality, convenient venues on an ICMC budget; but I didn't find the atmosphere or acoustics of the church to be exceptional and wish that another hall on or nearer to the university campus could have been used instead.

In addition, speaking of disappointments, I was dismayed that several (at least three) ICMC performances consisted of playing pack studio mixes of works that clearly were meant to be performed live. I heard from others that this happened in at least one instance because the composer of the piece in question could not realize her work live in rehearsal and that the ICMC administrators kindly agreed to play her studio recording as a substitute. However, while I applaud the ICMC's kindness, I certainly hope that measures are taken to insure that this doesn't become a trend.

Election Day

A unique aspect of this ICMC was that it has held in the U.S. State of Florida on the United States' presidential election day. This strange coincidence was punctuated into the conference itself in the piece *Iteration 31* by the trio Jomenico, performed on the morning concert the day of the election. For this election day performance, Jomenico altered *Iteration 31*to include twenty seconds of an obviously anti-Bush and profanity-laden song by rapper Eminem. However, although the audience in the concert hall clearly felt ambivalent about the intrusion of political sloganeering into an ICMC concert, the pervasive gloomy mood on the day after the election made it apparent that the majority of ICMC attendees agreed with Eminem in spirit, if not in his exact choice of words.

Concert 1:

This reviewer missed the first half of concert one, which featured works by David Jaffe, Jon Christopher Nelson, and Howard Fredrics. Some notable works from the second half included Bonnie Miksch's *Inklings on the loose*, for flute and audio playback, performed with verve by Margaret Lancaster; and Jesse Allison's *Mouth Harp*, for harmonica and live processing. Chris Bailey's *Scrape-a-Doo* was a brief, fun change of pace in the middle of the concert, serving up a structure of alternating riffs and tunes that pleased the ear like scoop of sonic sherbet.

Concert 2:

The second concert of ICMC combined a number of quite successful pieces, including Jean-Claude Risset's *Resonant Sound Spaces*, a multi-movement eight-channel work using concrete sounds as its sonic materials. This piece opened with an exploration of metal sounds--bells, gongs, and various manipulations of these—layering these to create a sonically rich but generally gentle atmosphere. As the piece progressed through subsequent movements, Risset turned toward plucked string sounds and moments of crowd ambience, and a train crossing, but used sounds of church bells as a link back to a set of bell sonorities that reminded one of the work's opening. *Resonant Sound Spaces* expressed a calm assurance throughout, allowing sounds time to speak, interact, and evolve. This resulted in a quite "clean" composition, not crammed with detail but instead drawing clear lines across time.

Wayne Siegel's *Sisters* was a tense meditation on the marriage of sound and motion. The work, for two dancers and real time sound generation, used data from sensors worn by the dancers (DIEM Dance Digital Interface) to synthesize music via granular synthesis, comb filtering, and other processes. Musically, the work contrasted dense granular textures with clear fundamental pitches with boisterous avalanches of granular noise. In both cases, the material granulated was generally speech.

Mari Kimura's *Guitar Botana* was a dramatic and virtuosic work for violin and guitarbot, a robotic instrument created by Eric Singer and one of several robotic instruments created by Singer and a few others under the designation *LEMUR Orchestra*. The guitarbot was fascinating to watch, as motorized "hands" slid up and down its four guitar-like necks to play different pitches. Ms. Kimura only had two hands, of course, but she compensated for this with her tremendous speed, control, and musicality.

L'Arpa di Laura, by Christian Eloy, was a wonderfully creative piece, subtly using processing to alter sounds played by harpist Valerie Von Pechy Whitcup. Ms. Whitcup knocked on her instrument, rubbed strings, and played a wide range of melodic motives, block chords, and

arpeggios, in a thorough but organic exploration of her instrument's capabilities. Eloy composed exciting and engaging material throughout, although I think the work would benefit from a bit of judicious editing.

Three works on concert two employed video. The first was Michael Theodore's *Sivel*, which combined mysterious electroacoustic sounds with distorted paint images. The second was *Gesture Lesson*, by Michael Berkowski (music) and Gregory Scranton (video), a short, playful animation that used a two-dimensional grid of bright red dots on a white background to portray a series of physical interactions by two figures, accompanied by equally playful synthesized music that combined harmonic tones and bursts of noise into fluid motions.

The third work that used video was Roberto Morales' *Cenzontle* for flute with MSP/Jitter. This piece began with furious flute gestures of breathy notes and vocalizations, accompanied onscreen by the emergence of a complex OpenGL three-dimensional shape: A violet glob with spiky knobs coming out from it in all directions. The onscreen object changed its size, shape, and position onscreen based on the flute's playing, so that it was in near constant motion, a jittery space porcupine that scurried around its virtual world. Mr. Morales played several contrasting thematic materials as the piece progressed, and the jittery shape onscreen was joined by a small number of other objects, although it was always the "star" of the visuals. Overall, the work was a solid virtuosic showpiece with an interesting formal shape; but I was never sure why the piece needed the video.

Concert Three
Concert three's highlights included Andrew May's *Chant/Songe* for clarinet and computer. Written for virtuoso F. Gerard Errante, who played it on this concert, this piece combined attractive clarinet writing with delays, thumping percussive sounds, and granularization of the clarinet. Joseph Waters' *Flamehead* combined vibraphone, Chinese gongs, and electronics began with shimmering electronic sounds followed by noisy rhythms on the Chinese bowls, and later became quite jazzy, with the computer sounds and vibes trading fours in a convincing duet.

Concert Five
Concert five featured flutes and multimedia. The flutes, played engagingly by Elizabeth McNutt and Ann Stimson, were soloists in works by Eric Lyon, Robert Rowe, and Russell Pinkston (McNutt) and Mark Ainger (Stimson). Happily, the three flute works were quite distinct from one another: Lyon's *Onceathon 2* cut unexpectedly between long tones, birdlike motives, and jazzy riffs; Rowe's *Flutter* set the flute in a dense texture of processing and percussive sounds; Pinkston's *Lizamander* led clean, tuneful themes into a swooping and rhythmic tornado; and Ainger's *Pacific Variations III* was a gentle, lyrical piece with a pervading sense of disquietude.

The first multimedia work of the concert was *Ich, mich und mir*, created by Palindrome (Deu), an appealing work that featured dancers in black rain suits performing to glitchy music that alternated quiet textures with ringing drones and bursts of noise. The second multimedia piece, *Id-fusiones* by Rodrigo Cadiz, was a work for music with video on DVD. This work's music combined an array of gong-, flute-, and bell-like sounds with additive synthesis textures; and its video component swept a design of patterns of lines in primary colors across the screen. Among the other works on concert five, Timothy Polashek's *Minature Fantasy* was notable: A one-minute, two-channel fixed media work, its pithy treatment of analog-style synthesized sounds was a pleasant, focused respite amid the larger works.

Concert Eight

Concert eight was one of the most interesting of the entire conference. From the jumpy clarinet lines of Kristine Burn's *Atanos I* to the lyrical warmth of Benjamin Broening's *Nocturnes/Doubles* to the swoops, shimmer, and 3-D video fantasy of Christopher Penrose's *My First Electric Dragon*, the program was varied and generally successful.

A few works on this concert contained overt jazz references: Bruce Pennycook's *Club Life*, Gil Weinberg's *Iltur 1*, and Mark Applebaum's *Intellectual Property*. Applebaum's piece was the most striking of these, and he played his own compositon (for disklavier) with intensity and seeming abandon. This twisting, busy piece begins with a series of dense, non-tonal statements across the keyboard. As the work continued, the preprogrammed disklavier gestures interacted with the live performer in parallel, canonically, and as call and response, creating a thick fantasia that grew more and more overtly jazzy until it surrendered itself fully to jazz in its last few minutes.

Another work performed by its composer was Jeff Stolet's *Tokyo Lick*, an exciting piece in which Stolet swung rapid, karate-like hand motions over a pair of infrared sensors like some kind of bebop shaman. The sensor data was translated by a laptop into cascading melodic runs and block chords of various kinds, resulting in a virtuosic runaway train of horizontal and vertical musical energy. Although Stolet's use of piano samples as his sole musical sound was not especially interesting, his combination of dynamic physical and musical gestures combined into a wonderfully successful piece.

In the midst of these busy works, Matthew Burtner's *Snowprints* was striking in contrast. Well-performed by members of the NODUS ensemble, this quiet composition for percussion, cello, piano, flute, video, and CD focused on delicate sounds, including strings drawn across piano strings, trills, tremolos, and glissandi, and created an ominous atmosphere.

Concert Ten

All the works on concert ten were created for fixed media playback, except for *House Taken Over*, a work for flute and tape composed by Jeff Stadelman and played by the irrepressible Elizabeth McNutt. (If an award was given for the hardest-working performer at ICMC 2004, Ms. McNutt would have run away with it!) This piece combined cued soundfiles and light MSP processing to illustrate ideas from a short story of the same name by Julio Cortazar.

The playback works on this concert varied interestingly: Paul Koonces *Out of Breath* employed minimal pitch material and synthesized tones created from analysis and manipulation of a single flute note to create a meditative focus on timbral nuances. Panayiotis Kokoras' *Slida* also explored timbre, combining an array of guitar samples into gestures unplayable in real time. Per Bloland's *The Wonderous Delight of Profound Ineptitude* was created from highly-processed samples of an anti-war rally, and in it rich buzzes, pulses, car horns, and snippets of the crowd (filtered and reverbed) were arranged into a rich and convincing musical statement. Finally, Noah Keesecker's *Mechanika* surrounded the audience on all sides with clanging metallic machinery that seemed initially threatening but eventually resolved into a techno-inspired beat.

Concert Eleven

William Kleinsasser's *Smooth Wood, Flash Metal* opened concert eleven. Written for flute, clarinet, and computer (Lisa Cella, flute; E. Michael Richards, clarinet), this work featured strong, contrasting melodic themes and effective musical pacing. The computer processed the live instruments using primarily delays and filters, creating effective shadowing of the live instruments but never becoming the primary musical voice. Other works on this concert included Jennifer Bernard's *Hallucination,* a fixed media work that blended FM buzz tones, plucked string-like arpeggios, and what sounded like granularized rock music; Joseph Sarlo's *Darkness and Nothing More*, a rumbling, dark rumination on Poe's *The Raven*; and Mike Frengel's *And Then, Romina...*, a work for prepared electric guitar and CD that closed the concert with a strange, twisting journey from howling guitar notes to death metal-inspired chords, tolling guitar harmonics, and clean, quiet half step wavers. Frengel unified these materials via both his own performance and the CD part, clearly delineating sections and creating interesting sonic juxtapositions; and in the end the work seemed both kinetically and formally satisfying.

Concert Fifteen

The penultimate concert of ICMC was unfortunately the last I was able to attend, and served as a satisfying endpoint for me. The program included four fixed media works, beginning with Adrian Moore's *Dreaming of the Dawn*, a fifteen-minute work that traverses a sonic environment created primarily from extensively processed samples of instrumental sounds. *Dreaming of the Dawn* takes its name from an Emily Dickinson poem and further inspiration from great works composed at studio 16, Maison de Radio France, where Moore mixed his piece.

Another playback work on concert fifteen was *one thousand seven hundred and fourteen questions*, an eight-minute work for stereo sound by Michael Gurevich and Lindsay Manning. This piece consisted entirely of a constant stream of queries spoken in English by a small number of individuals. The questions ranged from the philosophical to the mundane and were mostly rather concise (from under a second to just a few seconds long). The questions were edited nearly throughout the piece to begin just after one another, resulting in a dense barrage of interrogatives without answers. For the first few minutes, I found the different voices and seemingly random series of questions to be quite engaging. However, as the piece continued I began to wish for another layer or type of activity—DSP manipulation of the voices, non-vocal sounds, activity in frequency ranges outside the vocal range, and so on. Perhaps there was a sonic organization of the material or the texts spoken, but if so I did not perceive it. Thus, the ultimate effect of this interrogatory torrent was, for me, a sense of diminishing (though not disappearing) interest.

The two works featuring live performers on this concert were *The Castle of* Oranto, by Christopher Cook, and *Tele*, by Chapman Welch. Of these I was most intrigued by *Tele*, an eight-channel piece for electric guitar and tape that featured clean, lyrical guitar melodies inspired by American country and rockabilly music--but also at times reminiscent of Robert Fripp--combined with skittering, noisy sounds that jumped around the speaker field.

A final work worth discussing from this program is Ivica Bukvic's *Legisonitus #1: Gone in 8 Minutes.* This piece, a soundscape composition for two-channel sound, seemed to be a minimally-processed and edited recording of eight minutes from the composer's life: His family awakes, they take a ride in their car, and they arrive somewhere. My experience of this work was that of listening

to a sonic documentary, since, aside from one time-stretched spoken sentence as the family enters their car, all sounds in the piece seemed to be unaltered by the composer.

Interestingly, in its existence as nearly raw recorded ambience, this piece calls into question the limits of what one considers electroacoustic music. Most often in our field composition entails removing sounds from their original contexts, reorganizing them, and changing some of their attributes: duration, relative strength of frequency components, etc. In that light, Bukvic's *Legisonitus #1* is radical because it is nearly a non-composition. For those of us used to evaluating electroacoustic works based on the success of the composers' skills at sonic sculpture, this work defiantly offers almost nothing for us to judge. It asks us, as John Cage did, to hear ambient sounds as music. But can one, ought one, to hear Mr. Bukvic's recorded sounds as *electroacoustic* music? For me, this is not answered easily.

Beyond the Concerts
ICMC 2004 presented four installations works: *Experimental Extremism* by Elainie Lillios, Bonnie Mitchell, and Gregory Cornelius; *Friction Sticky Rough* by Fred Syzmanski; *The Singing Book* by Gary Kendall; and *Layered Histories* by Robert Gluck and Cynthia Rubin. Of these four, I experienced only *Experimental Extremism* and *The Singing Book.*

Experimental Extremism inhabited a large room. Abstract video designs were projected on the walls, electroacoustic sounds played from many hidden speakers, and a pathway was marked on the floor. Along the pathway were occasional sensor pads, and when one stepped on a pad it caused alterations in the music and video materials. Multiple hits of the sensor seemed to "juice up" the audio and video, so that excited participants, such as the little girl following the path in front of me, could get dramatic feedback from the system.

In sharp contrast, Gary Kendall's *The Singing Book* created a quiet, static, meditative space that I found delightful within the context of my hyper and dense ICMC week. Located in a small, nearly entirely darkened room, participants were invited to sit down and linger. Ambient recorded music played that the composer had created via spectral analysis and manipulation of his own field recordings of running mountain water. Near the center of the room on a table, Kendall had arranged a few objects under a single light to serve as a point of meditative focus; and he also provided written instructions for a specific meditation that listeners could practice while visiting the installation. I enjoyed a peaceful ten minutes at *The Singing Book* and would have stayed longer, but I had to run and catch the bus to the next concert.

A Little Off...
Continuing what seems to have become a regular ICMC feature, Margaret Schedel and Joe Abbati curated three nights of 2004 Off-ICMC events. The Off-ICMC, begun at ICMC 2000 in Berlin, attempts to represent stylistic streams of contemporary electroacoustic music that are more naturally at home in a club or bar than in a formal concert setting: Beat-based music, glitch, jazz-inspired, and etc. The 2004 ICMC happened at the Titanic Brewery, a comfy brewpub (with wireless access!) near campus that proved to be a good venue for both music and socializing.

The Off-ICMC roster included a wide range of performers, led by Tuesday night's "Election Coverage" by Cort Lippe and Zack Settel, the infamous Convolution Brothers, joined by very

special guest Miller Puckette. These three were a power trio of mayhem, turning a live network feed of election night returns into a fun house of musical and visual processing.

Wednesday night featured Barry Moon, plus local Miami experimental musicians Phoenecia, Devin Smith, Jacque Polynice, DJ Domo, GearMonkey, Kuris Random and video artist Meeloatch. I also heard something about "open mic night" on Wednesday. This sounded fascinating ("How do I plug my laptop into an open mic?"), but unfortunately I could not attend and do not know whether it actually happened.

I did make it on Friday night, for an epic lineup that included Butch Rovan and myself, Gregory Taylor, Eric Lyon, James Harley and Roger Dannenberg, Bonnie Miksch, Meg Schedel with Charles Woodman and Alison Rootberg, John Young, and Ballet Mechanique (J. Anthony Allen and Noah Keesecker).

And in the end...

It seems to me that the ICMC has had some back luck for the past few years—ICMC 2001 happened in Cuba just after the September 11 terrorist attacks; ICMC 2002 in Göteborg was plagued by organizational problems; and ICMC 2003 in Singapore happened just months after the SARS epidemic in Southeast Asia became headline news. After three years of bad news, the ICMC needed a strong success to reinvigorate its reputation; and fortunately, ICMC 2004 provided just that. It wasn't perfect, but it was definitely well done. A non-profit, non-commercial event of this scope can be quite difficult to realize, and Colby Leider and his cohorts set the bar for which future ICMCs will reach.