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## Composer Nathaniel Bartlett plays with unique electroacoustic setup

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An audience at the Icehouse found themselves surrounded on all sides by a vast array of electronic equipment Thursday night. To make the unfamiliar setup less daunting, musician and composer [Nathaniel Bartlett](#) demystified the technology at work before his performance.

“Hopefully, if it all works properly you can ignore all the technology and appreciate the sounds and the music.”

Bartlett, based in Madison, Wisconsin, plays electroacoustic music with a combination of his five-octave marimba and computer-based electronics. Some of Bartlett’s movements are picked up via a Kinect—the Xbox device that detects motion—and used to manipulate electronic sounds through his computer, such as sine waves and manipulated samples of the marimba and percussion instruments. The resulting sound is channeled through a cubic surround speaker system.

Bartlett’s custom speaker system consists of eight main loudspeakers and a sub-woofer, all of which were directly aimed at the center of the room. They create what Bartlett called “a true three-dimensional sound” more sophisticated than even cinema surround sound.

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Bartlett played his composition *Return Transmission* for the duration of his time on stage. In his introduction, he described the piece as “monolithic” and said the listener is meant to become “immersed in sound physically, but ... also immersed in the sound in terms of time.” The description is not far off the mark. *Return Transmission* runs for about 40 minutes without any break or interruption, but perception of time drifts, stretches and warps while listening to it. The effect is truly hypnotic.

While its abstract style may make it difficult for some, *Return Transmission*'s warm tones and ghostly echos should be rewarding for any adventurous listener.



After his performance, Bartlett generously demonstrated his gear to curious audience members for another 40 minutes. Bartlett explained his open-source Linux computer system, complex pedal board controls and [invented musical notation](#) with great affability.

A setup as elaborate as Bartlett's could be chocked up as audiophile perfectionism for its own sake, but in his case the attention to detail is purposeful. The speakers engulf listeners in a sphere of music and orient their ears to distinguish fine subtleties in the sound. “When you spatialize sound, your brain is able to grab on to it and understand individual parts much better,” Bartlett said.

An audience member asked about how certain sounds seemed louder from his seat in the left side of the room, and Bartlett said, “theoretically, to get the best image, you would be sitting equidistant from all the speakers. It's like a fish-eye lens. You take a picture with someone a wide-angle lens and they look fine if they're in the center, and then the more they get off-center the more skewed and distorted they get.”

Bartlett said that the speakers put out extremely high-definition even from non-optimal positions. His setup has been in development for 15 years, and while it is unlikely to radically change in the near future, it is subject to constant tweaks and refinements.

“The fact that it's not commercial and it's not proprietary format really is an analogue to the kind of music I do, because it's not commercial music, it's not gonna get played on the radio, so in spirit it works too.”

Bartlett said there is a tendency within academic electronic music to favor mathematical results over emotional value, but it's not an attitude he shares.

“Some people have such a fetish for technology, and so they’re like, ‘if you’re not using super-fancy technology and doing super-sophisticated programming, your music couldn’t possibly be worthwhile or sophisticated or good.’ And I am totally not of that opinion. If it sounds good, it is good.”

And it was good. Chances to catch live music like this are rare, so see Bartlett if you can.



Photos by Gabriel Radley/DD

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