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Adventures in loudspeakers and Stockhausen will introduce composer Nathaniel Bartlett to Philly in a new series at Crane Arts

March 26th, 2014 | 2:15PM | By **Shaun Brady** (<http://thekey.xpn.org/author/shaunbrady/>)



(<http://thekey.xpn.org/aatk/files/2014/03/NB.jpg>)

Nathaniel Bartlett | photo courtesy of the artist

Major changes in life are always followed by a period of readjustment and acclimatization. Having recently moved to the Philadelphia area from his native Madison, Wisconsin, composer and percussionist **Nathaniel Bartlett** (<http://www.nathanielbartlett.com/>) has decided to take the initiative and introduce himself to his newfound community via a five-concert series beginning Wednesday night and continuing monthly at the **Crane Arts Old School White Space** (<http://www.cranearts.com/>).

“My experience in the past has been that if you go to a new city and give one concert, it just doesn’t make a very big impact,” Bartlett says. “Doing it piecemeal just doesn’t seem to achieve a critical mass. I’m hoping this series will introduce interested people in Philadelphia to what I do.”

The series, dubbed “Sound-Space Audio Lab,” will provide an introduction not just for Bartlett but for his unique, technologically inventive approach to composing and performing. Bartlett’s music augments his five-octave acoustic marimba with high-definition electronic sound, utilizing his 8-channel loudspeaker cube. The system surrounds the audience with eight speakers, allowing for an immersive, highly dimensional sound space.

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Bartlett revealed a nascent version of his loudspeaker rig to Philly audiences at a Bowerbird-presented concert in 2006, while he was briefly residing in Bryn Mawr. He's had several years to tinker with the idea since, and will arrive at Crane Arts with a far more developed set-up this time around. "If you've ever listened to a really good, well-made audio recording on a properly set-up stereo system," Bartlett says, "you'll notice that the sound exists seamlessly between the loudspeakers. This idea takes that concept, where the sounds can exist anywhere between the speakers, and applies it to a much, much larger and truly 3D space."



This week's inaugural concert is a showcase for the loudspeaker cube. The show will feature an "audio projection" of a high-definition recording of Bartlett's 2011 composition "Trichotomic Ecology," featuring the composer on marimba, Nils Bultmann on viola, and Geoffrey Brady playing a variety of small percussion instruments. "Both of these players have very unique and signature approaches and sounds," Bartlett explains. "So I wanted to write a piece using a real-time notation that would allow a great deal of flexibility for the individual personalities of the performers to shine through."

The spatial possibilities of the loudspeaker cube will be revealed by the separation of the three recorded instrumentalists, and in particular by the way that Brady's various instruments, laid out on a 3'x7' table during recording, will be differentiated within the virtual space created by the speakers. These sounds are then manipulated by Bartlett's computer in real time and moved around the space, creating "ghost versions of the instruments that can exist in other spatial locations than the originating sounds."

The series continues in April with a recent composition called "In Balance," for marimba and a computer interface that tracks the movement of Bartlett's mallets and body via infrared sensors. "I can control the computer and make sounds in very fluid and complex ways by using my mallets and my body

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motions,” Bartlett says. “The technology is also useful in helping me to build these big sound worlds as a solo artist, since getting together a large ensemble has some huge practical problems.”

May’s concert will project a pair of early multi-channel electronic works by Karlheinz Stockhausen from the late 1950s through Bartlett’s loudspeaker array. A primitive approach to the three-dimensionality that Bartlett is realizing through his electronics work, the Stockhausen works were recorded with a loudspeaker that could rotate between four microphones. “I think that would find a pretty strong consensus that these early Stockhausen pieces are seminal for everyone working in serious electronic music,” he says. “They’re so influential and in addition to having this huge palette of amazing sounds, it’s one of the earlier utilizations of spatialization as a prime ingredient in the music. I think that really inspired a lot of people’s imaginations.”



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03:30

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Over the years Bartlett has worked with technology, other composers have written pieces specifically for him, a few of which will comprise the June Sound-Space Audio Lab concert. The program, which traces the evolution of Bartlett’s approach, includes two pieces by Allan Schindler for live instrumentalist and fixed media (ie, static, prerecorded sound), and a more recent Stephen Dembski work for real-time computer-generated sound.

The final concert of the series, in July, will feature a piece for Bartlett’s most up-to-the-minute technological interests – literally, as it hasn’t been written yet. “That will build in everything new musically and software-wise that I’ve been able to accomplish from now until that point,” he promises.

Bartlett started working with computer-generated music as an undergrad in the late 1990s. Working with code that controlled the trajectory of a mono sound file in a stereo sound field, he began to imagine a more expansive soundscape. “It was immediately obvious how wonderful this stuff would be if

you could expand it into a larger and more immersive space,” he recalls. “I was always thinking about sounds in terms of how the original sounds would be choreographed, how they would be placed within a certain space, whether they would be static or moving, and how they would move in relation to other sounds. So in addition to timbre and rhythm and all these other building blocks, I was always thinking about how I could make space more concrete and pronounced and rich.”

Bartlett began his musical education on the piano, like many other children who are set down in front of a keyboard long before they have any desire to make or study music. During elementary school he determined to switch to the drums, expanding to other percussion instruments in high school. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison he studied under James Latimer, who also was a member of the Madison Marimba Quartet, and found his calling.

“He had a huge percussion studio at the university,” Bartlett recalls of Latimer, “chock full of amazing instruments – everything from a two-octave set of tuned cowbells to tympani, vibraphones, drum sets, and a grand piano. It was like I’d died and gone to heaven. In particular, he had a five-octave marimba, which at that time was even more of a big deal and a rarity than it is now. The low notes of the marimba sounded so amazing, and when I actually heard the Madison Marimba Quartet play in an art museum downtown, the sound of four marimbas in a reverberant space was so fantastic that I ended up focusing all my energy on the marimba.”

Bartlett went on to study at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York and London’s Royal Academy of Music. An interest in technology and electronics hardware has run parallel to his musical pursuits, though he admits to “a love/hate relationship with certain parts of technology. I’m not really an abstract fan of coding for its own sake and I don’t like staring at computer screens all that much. But I come from an audiophile background and get a lot of enjoyment out of designing and building my own stuff.”

He calls these twin interests a “chicken and egg” situation, saying, “I got interested in the electronics because of what sounds they helped me produce, but once I started to learn more it started to feed back and I started to learn and understand what sounds I could produce, which expanded my palette greatly. Artistically, it allows me to realize a number of different sonic visions. The musical power and drama of being able to spatialize audio and create these environments is a huge deal for me.”

Nathaniel Bartlett will begin his residency at the Crane Arts Old School White Space on Wednesday, March 26th. More information can be found [here \(https://www.facebook.com/events/613671742037286/\)](https://www.facebook.com/events/613671742037286/).

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