

Laptop Symphony



Students working on laptops are a familiar sight at American universities. But in the Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk), the first of its kind, students use their networked Apple PowerBooks to make music. Tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain, who joined PLOrk for its first public performance, on campus in April, says the experience was “like flying.”

“At one point I was just playing by myself so there was just the natural tone of the instrument and then suddenly I looked at my colleagues and then they started to intervene a bit and at that point the instruments started to morph into being something else altogether,” Hussain told New Jersey Public Television & Radio. “The identity changed. It was like seeing the bottle open and the genie come out and the

instruments started to sound like voices.”

PLOrk is the brainchild of Dan Trueman, composer and professor of music, and Perry R. Cook, professor of computer science and music, at Princeton University. “PLOrk began just this past fall and...performing with Zakir set the bar very high for us. He was remarkably responsive and immediately had constructive suggestions for us,” says Trueman. Hussain, who was at Princeton as a visiting professor of music, performed PLahara, an improvisational piece inspired by the *lahara* forms of Indian music.

Each PLOrk member’s unit consists of a laptop, six-speaker hub, an audio interface, power unit and six-channel amplifier. They supplement their stations with keyboards, graphic pads or motion-activated sensors taped to their wrists.

PLOrk uses a new music language—

Chuck—written by Princeton computer science doctoral student Ge Wang, and the conductor’s signals are conveyed through text messaging, traditional baton-waving, printed signs with instructions or sign language. The methods of playing can be very different and the sounds, which change with every piece, are pretty eclectic. “Some of it is tuneful, rhythmic, even danceable, while some of it is textural and gestural,” says Trueman.

PLOrk intends to stay avant-garde. “One of the main motivations for PLOrk was to discover music that would be impossible or unimaginable without a laptop orchestra,” he says. Trueman hopes to go on striking unusual notes and to develop instruments and pieces that will make performers break out in a sweat. These may be challenging and fun to play, he says. And it will also “be fun to watch as they are played.” —D.K.



Photographs by LORENE LAVORA