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Laptop Orchestra boots up in N.J.

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Music Critic

PRINCETON - Having long taken pop music hostage, electronically generated sounds often threaten to revolutionize more serious music - why not? - with an infinite variety of timbre and gesture, not to mention the control over such elements that technology offers.

There's been plenty of resistance in classical music culture, but the Princeton Laptop Orchestra, which had a highly publicized roll-out Tuesday at Richardson Auditorium here, may be the exception. Key people from Philadelphia's new-music community were in attendance.

Jointly directed by Princeton University faculty members Dan Trueman (a composer) and Perry Cook (head of the school's sound lab), PLOrk is in its first year, founded with \$120,000 in seed money for its highly portable equipment, and has up to 15 people onstage operating laptop computers, each connected to a small, multidirectional speaker and carrying out its own composer-determined musical function.

Those functions can indeed be honed to a certain extent by the human being in front of the screen, which means PLOrk doesn't fly when operated by mere technicians. It requires musicians to make subtle decisions such as blend of sound. Improvisational possibilities are vast: Acoustical sounds from onstage musicians can be processed and echoed by laptops.

Much of Tuesday's repertoire wasn't really concert music but ambient music, the sort that succeeds on atmosphere more than content, but atmosphere that can be dependably created with an ensemble of this sort. Aiding in that, Richardson Auditorium, with its circular shape and arch-dominated design, was dimly lit to suggest a holy rite at hand. Musicians dressed in black and sat on what appeared to be meditation pillows in front of their laptops. Many were barefoot. It was all invitingly mysterious.

In the opening piece, the lovely *In/Still* by Tomie Hahn and Curtis Bahn, some musicians wore electronic sensors taped to their wrists, allowing them to

mold the sounds they made with hand gestures. Conducting could be anything from a quasi-interpretive dance (Hahn in *In/Still*), to prosaic hand signals or, in one case, pieces of paper held up with printed directions containing subjective words like *wicked*, *sparse* and *very sparse*, plus a seating diagram indicating which members the directions are for.

Only occasionally, as in *On the Floor* by Scott Smallwood, was the music frankly descriptive: That piece is about gambling, with each laptop treated like a slot machine with a finite number of musical chances, the sounds becoming more generalized as the chances run out and as the members individually leave the stage (much as in Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony). Brad Garton's *Idle Swamp*, my favorite work on the program, was indeed a swamp of sound, with layers coalescing into chords (yes, real chords, ones worth contemplating) held for an extended duration.

Given the potential sterility of this medium, you were almost relieved to witness some near train wrecks. The final piece, *PLahara*, a semi-improvised collaboration by Trueman, tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain, and the So Percussion group, had, at first, odd, tentative passages when little seemed to be going on.

Sound Scatter featured avant-garde cult figure Pauline Oliveros on a retuned accordion, and sought to electronically manipulate the sounds she was making, but with only intermittently engaging results. Paul Lansky had to rise from his laptop to check the vital signs of his colleagues between movements of his excellent *A Guy Walked Into a Modal Bar*, based on a series of sonically similar watery ostinatos with scales hailing from many different eras and cultures. So even the problems were encouraging. Stay tuned. Or powered up.

ONLINE EXTRA

Listen to samples from the PLOrk debut concert at [http:// go.philly.com/davidpatrickstearns](http://go.philly.com/davidpatrickstearns) Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at 215-854-4907 or dstearns@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/>

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Information: The PLOrk Web site is <http://plork.cs.princeton.edu>. The next performance will be at 8 p.m. May 2 at the Chancellor Green Rotunda on the Princeton University campus.