

A solid marriage: music and computer

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IT was like a 21st century Stonehenge ritual, with the Druids replaced by the do-its of computer technology.

Stanford's new music group was out communing with the elements and making a little history in the process.

Close to 300 people sitting on a scenic campus hill witnessed the whimsical rituals beginning at the moment of sunset Thursday night and spent

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the next three hours under the stars drinking in digitally synthesized music and three-dimensional film from the surface of Mars that awed the assemblage.

The scientific film, "Mars in 3D," an afterthought to the electronic concert, consisted of vivid, awesome scenes shot in still photos by the Mars Lander. Producer Elliott Levinthal gave a dry-witted narration which was augmented by an eerie, lucid sound track composed (digitally, of course) by Michael McNabb and Bill Schotts-taedt.

Both composers belong to Stanford's CCRMA, which was giving its summer concert, an event destined to become an annual spectacle by popular acclaim.

On the more serious side, the concert presented a first. The performance of Andrew Schloss' "The Towers of Hanoi" marked the first multi-channel, direct-digital synthesis ever produced in concert, according to CCRMA Director John Chowning. This means that while a computer had compiled all the necessary programs and spewed out the necessary numbers in advance, the CCRMA real-time digital synthesizer read and produced the sounds on the spot (i.e., in "real time"), without having to tape it in advance.

The pieces by a host of CCRMA composers came at the audience from quadraphonically placed speakers. The electronic sound is both deft and sophisticated, especially in its gradual transformations on one recognizable element — say, a flute — into quite another — as, say, a narrator of poetry. I was bowled over by a pair of works by James Moorer, who altered the mellifluous bass voice of Charles Shere into a tenor (without the usual "chipmunk" effect), the babble of a crowd and a lion's roar.

Gamelan effects permeated the pieces by John Chowning, Schloss and Loren Rush. Rush showed a strong Steve Reich influence in his "A Little Traveling Music," with a live keyboard part as one ingredient. In "Desert Dance," Paul Kirk used electronic effects like bells and violin and McNabb's "Dreamsong" went from bell to soprano, a transition that has become one of the CCRMA concert signatures.