

# CrossTalk

BY MICHAEL SCHUTZ

**E**lectronic music ensembles are fighting the same battles and misconceptions faced years ago by the now-established medium of percussion ensemble. Early percussion ensembles struggled for popularity and legitimacy in part because they challenged people to think of percussion instruments in a new musical light.

CrossTalk's successful performance at PASIC 2003 (their second in four years) is a testament to the ensemble's success in encouraging interest in electronic music ensembles—a genre that makes percussion ensemble look “old.” Founded by Norm Weinberg and currently co-directed with Robin Horn, CrossTalk's goal is “not just to change the types of sounds, but to change the way people are thinking about the sounds and therefore the music.”

## CROSSTALK

Norm had been dreaming of running a group like CrossTalk for years. His move to the University of Arizona gave him the opportunity he'd been waiting for to start his own ensemble showcasing percussionists in an exclusively electronic medium. Support from the UA School of Music, UA College of Fine Arts, and the Treistman Center for New Media as well as industry partnerships with Alternate Mode, Yamaha, E-mu Systems, and ZenDrum helped outfit CrossTalk with the estimated \$34,000 worth of gear needed to run such an ensemble.

Over the past seven years CrossTalk has gone from a fleeting vision to a successful reality, performing at the Arizona, California, and Nevada Days of Percus-

sion as well as PASIC '99 and 2003. The group has also performed at the University of Arizona Digital Arts Symposium and the 2000 Toronto Musical Intersections Conference.

One of the most pressing problems facing CrossTalk is familiar to percussion ensemble directors throughout the country—that of finding quality literature. Be-

they're not locked into just playing drumset for making music in a cover-band setting. If they want, they can play bass on the MalletKAT or even DrumKAT, which opens up new possibilities for jobs and musical expression.”

The creative potential and opportunity to explore new sound worlds more than makes up for the technical challenges of

working in an entirely electronic medium. CrossTalk's entire repertoire was written specifically for the group, so there is great freedom to explore new textures, sounds, and interpretations. The downside is the investment of time, which is no different than learning to play acoustic percussion instruments. Mastering the electronic medium requires technical fluency with many aspects of electronic sound production, including synthesis techniques, interface design, and digital audio theory. However, the oppor-

tunity to work with a sonic arsenal encompassing all sounds known to man (and a few never before discovered) makes this a worthwhile challenge.

## WHY PLUG IN?

Attention to the subtleties of sound is a trademark of any accomplished musician. The ability to control and manipulate sound requires the ability to listen critically and identify sonic nuances to a fine degree. By spending time shaping electronic sounds, students can hone listening skills that then transfer well to the acoustic realm. Choosing the appropriate sound in an electronic context is similar to the challenge of choosing the right triangle or cymbal; the instrument that sounds best



CrossTalk's collection of sound modules used during the shooting of “Alias: The Videos”

cause the group isn't interested in simply recreating traditional percussion ensemble music electronically, but rather aims to define a completely new medium, it must rely on new literature written specifically for the ensemble. The group's repertoire includes pieces written by past and present group members, winners of composition contests funded by the Shandel Foundation, and commissions from composers (such as Eric Bikales) with experience writing for electronic ensembles.

By exposing students to the wide range of possibilities with electronic instruments, Norm hopes to broaden his students' minds as much as their technical skills. He wants his students to “realize



CrossTalk students Garrett McGaugh, Erick Saoud, Lance Saxerud and Matt Jacklin performing in the TV studio during video production of "Alias: The Videos"

in isolation isn't always the right choice with an ensemble. The fine degree of control offered by synthesizers offer the possibility of thinking about sounds in more sophisticated terms. Rather than making vague timbral judgments of "dark" vs. "light" and "sharp" vs. "soft" attacks, teachers can use electronics to enable students to start thinking in more sophisticated terms such as ADSR envelopes and frequency bands. By using the control of electronic instruments to train ears to aspects of sound that are otherwise difficult to pinpoint and isolate, teachers can give their students a new depth to their sonic vocabulary.

In addition to offering unique possibilities for musical training, technology offers an opportunity for musical development in a non-traditional manner. While some make strong distinctions between acoustic and electronic music, Norm prefers not to think in those narrow terms. He feels that, "They are both different aspects of percussion playing that offer something different to those who study them. If it's good music and it's performed well, then it's good music performed well."

Electronic instruments "virtually democratize" by offering opportunities for those without extensive training to participate in the musical process. For ex-

ample, a student must spend years of practice in order to fluently play the marimba. However, the student who can sequence a melodic line on a keyboard can begin "performing" music immediately.

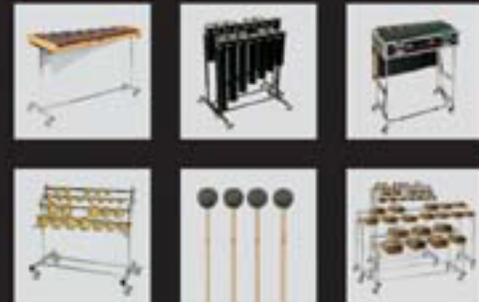
One of the great advantages of technology is that it opens up the world of music to creative people who don't have the training and background to speak through a traditional instrument. The bad thing is that it opens up the world of music to a lot of creative people that lack the training and background needed to make informed musical choices.

Technology offers a mechanism for bypassing the time commitment of traditional musical training, yet the growth that occurs during these years can't be replaced by a fancy sound module or the latest sequencing software. It would be foolish to think gear replaces musicianship, but it can offer better methods of pursuing it as students are able to begin working on sophisticated musical ideas involving sound shaping, phrasing, composition, and orchestration concurrently with the development of basic musicianship skills and technical facility.

#### ELECTRONIC FUTURE

As evidenced by the eclectic repertoire of CrossTalk, electronic music knows no sonic boundaries. The constant reduction

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in equipment size, cost, and complexity means that any sound, sound manipulation, and combination is within virtual reach of anyone with a MalletKAT, drum sequencer, ZenDrum, or any other type of controller.

Although CrossTalk is unique, other colleges and universities across the country are starting to explore the electronic genre. Northwestern launched its Lucid Dream Ensemble in 2002, Georgia Tech now boasts an Electronic Marching Percussion Ensemble, and many other programs are beginning to integrate electronics into their curricula.

While the application of technology-based music making can lead to problems if done incorrectly, ensembles such as CrossTalk demonstrate it can also be a rewarding and educationally valuable tool for musical development. The success of an electronic component in the college percussion curriculum has less to do with the equipment used than with how the equipment, software, and techniques are taught and applied. The success of CrossTalk shows that in addition to obvious pedagogical advantages, electronic music making can be a rewarding pursuit in its own right.

To learn more about the group, visit the CrossTalk Website at [www.crosstalk.arizona.edu](http://www.crosstalk.arizona.edu).

**Michael Schutz** is Director of Percussion Studies at Longwood University and performs frequently with the Charlottesville and University Symphony. He earned an MM degree in Percussion and Music Technology from Northwestern University and a BMA from Penn State University. Performances include concerts with the Virginia Consort, Altoona Symphony, and Pennsylvania Centre Chamber Orchestra, as well solo recitals at the Virginia/DC Day of Percussion and PMTA State Convention, and two summers on faculty at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. Since 2003 Michael has served as Chair of the *Percussive Notes* Music Technology Subcommittee.

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