

Elemental chances, measure by measure

On Friday, UI graduate student Thomas Judson and seven other students will present Spatial Intersections III, a concert featuring electronic-music compositions and video. For his piece, Judson's piano chops will be challenged by an unpredictable partner: a computer.

BY MAGGIE ANDERSON
THE DAILY IOWAN

No amount of practicing prevents the occasional misstep when Thomas Judson performs. But don't blame him — blame his computer.

Judson, who will graduate Saturday with a Ph.D. in music composition from the UI School of Music, juggles more than nerves during a show. He must also interpret shifted, delayed, and distorted sounds from his computer.

"I set [the computer] up to do certain things within certain parameters," he said. "But there are a lot of chance elements — in chance, you have mistakes. You have problems."

The 29-year-old will demonstrate his ability to deal with the haphazard and accidental at 7:30 p.m. Friday during the Spatial Intersections III concert, held at the UI Museum of Art.

Judson's technological duets consist of improvisational alterations between piano and computer, each interpreting and incorporating the other's sound. So if the computer makes an odd choice, he will try to integrate that sound into his part of the piece — in the tradition of John Cage and aleatoric music, the unexpected becomes a natural facet of the work.

"Traditional electronic music concerts have involved sitting in a dark room with tons of speakers around you. The idea of adding a visual element ... is the next step. Humans are driven by sight."

— Thomas Judson, artist

"[The computer] can choose to play a rhythm or ignore it — it's a lot of give and play," Judson said. "Every time it is performed, it will be different. I try to make it sound real."

Though the show's music is produced using mostly electronic equipment, all the participants strive for this kind of life-like quality. To this effect, he and the seven other performers don't just create sound. They add another essential element of sensual stimulation: video.

"Traditional electronic music concerts have involved sitting in a dark room with tons of speakers around you," Judson said. "The idea of adding a visual element ... is the next step. Humans are driven by sight."



Publicity photo

Spatial Intersections explores electronic art in various forms, including video and music.

Concert-goers often find that electronic music created with the help of chance is not what they expected, he said. A parallel can be found in Abstract Expressionist paintings, such as Jackson Pollock's. Like the old stand-by joke that

any 3-year-old can splatter some paint on a canvas, Judson said many people say, "I can make strange noises, too."

"It freaks them out. My mom always said, 'How come you don't write anything pretty?' Most people can't feel the pulse

— they can't find something to grasp onto."

But video creates a visual and mental handhold for viewers.

"A video can be incredibly strange, and people will watch it," Judson said. "Some people do have visual minds, but

ART EXHIBIT

Spatial Intersections III: Electronic Music and Video Art

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday
Where: UI Museum of Art
Admission: Free

combining them in today's world is easier."

It is such modern technology that drew Judson to the electronic medium over more classical forms. Though the composer has written sonatas and choir pieces, he prefers the versatility of a computer. With such a relatively new medium, musicians can experiment with classical forms, dance, and even video games — all without living under the shadow of the Greats.

"You can never play a piece as good as Beethoven," Judson said. "[But] the electronic medium is so available today. It can do anything."

E-mail: DIreporter@maggieanderson@uiowa.edu
maggieanderson@uiowa.edu