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## [hello world]

(Source: [Patrick McCurry Blogspot](#))

An interloper's review of the Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana's recital at the River Center in Columbus, Georgia on January 27, 2011

In grad school, we played with a Buchla synthesizer from the 60s. [Much like this one](#). Using our actual hands, we would plug patch cables, like the ones that connect guitars to amps, into the Buchla's dozens of ports. Dials on the machine would change the sound.

A configuration of cords and dials, called a patch, produces a unique sound. The Buchla's patches could conjure sounds ranging from a violin's delicate pizzicato to others much more raucous, unsettling or even frightening.

More than half a century after the birth of the Buchla, I stumble into a concert by Louisiana State University's [Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana \(LOL\)](#) at Columbus State University's Schrob College of Music in Columbus, Georgia. When LOL takes the stage, their five little laptops can control the electronic equivalent of a thousand Buchlas at a speed faster than they could survive being controlled.

I heard rhythmic phrases shaped by glowing handballs (Quartet for Colors by Yemin Oh). Players rang imaginary bells with Wii nunchucks (What, the Bells? by Nick Hwang). And real-time typing of text from the Internet triggered sequences of pitches assigned to computer keys ([hello world] by the group's co-director Jesse Allison).

Supporting the entire process is hundreds of hours of computer coding specific to these interfaces and these compositions. Seasoned and skilled musicians, academics all, presented new music written for these new instruments. The LOLs do the performing, the composing and they even write the software to run the machines.

In the piece Vocal Gua, with composer credit on the program to "The LOLs," two performers make vocal noises, spoken, sung, etc.--with a fair amount of etc.--into microphones. Hardware digitizes the sounds and converts them into patches. Custom software allows two laptop operators to alter these patches. They change the sound slightly or entirely deconstruct it, exploding it into a half-dozen new sounds, giving each its own rhythm and melody.

The performance displayed every facet of good chamber music. There was expressiveness, interaction, intimacy and balance. And just as the sound produced by a traditional chamber musician emanates from his immediate location, each of the LOLs was coupled with a custom built omnidirectional speaker.

The aptly titled Improvisations & Transformations, again with composer credits to the group as a whole, had a tuba player, a trombonist and a flutist accompanied by three iPad operator sidekicks. The acoustic and electronic trios balanced beautifully. The iPad performers interpreted the made-up lines of the wind players. It was an invigorating musical mind rub. Jeff Albert, the trombonist, was in his element as a free jazz improviser ([here's his website](#)). He led the instruments and really the entire piece. This was perhaps not his intention (it wasn't), but it worked, and well. All of this, combined with a clear arc of ensemble energy, I hope dispelled any idea that this was not chamber music.

Some pieces were conducted, such as Albert's Forbidden Butch. Laptop performers interpreted the composer's silent gestures, and filled the room with shining and sustained melody. Hwang's What, the Bells? was also conducted by Albert, but from a laptop, where he keyed instructions through the network.

In addressing the audience, the performers used humor and informality to present their music. They even invited us onstage afterward to gawk at and even play with the equipment. It was refreshing to be in an essentially classical music setting where the invisible curtain between performer and listener was drawn back. Maybe doing this sacrifices some glamor, but the familiarity helped me, especially when some of the music's alien constructs were hard to warm up to.

What may have really made the concert successful was the order of the compositions. The opener, CliX by Ge Wang, was a groovy little piece that was as accessible as a mainstream film score and reminisced of pop music, though clearly it was not pop music.

After that came InTwerp by Lindsay Hartman who also played flute on Improvisations & Transformations. Her piece used a familiar tabla (an indian drum) loop behind the distinctly unfamiliar action of performers using joysticks to manipulate vowel sounds. These pieces together I think eased me into the varying degrees and styles of unorthodoxy in the rest of the program.

It ended with a rigorous tonality bath, inChuck. LOL's co-director Stephen David Beck composed this short version (homage?) of the classic Terry Riley composition, In C. It was a reset button, and left me wanting more of everything--more gadgets, more "crazy" (their word) music and more of what was just an impressive display of talent.

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