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University program allows students to create experimental music

The Daily Reveille

With 92 speakers and an ultra-high definition projector in the Digital Media Center Theatre at its disposal, LSU's Experimental Music and Digital Media program pushes the boundaries of sound design and music creation.

LSU's Experimental Music and Digital Media program provides educational paths that allow students to create experimental music and other digital media without compromise. EMDM resides half in the School of Music and half in the Center for Computation and Technology to give students access to resources from both locations to create "sonic art."

EMDM will showcase what students practice during its Digital Divide event on Sept. 24 in the Digital Media Center Theatre. The event will help explain what the program does. EMDM assistant professor Jesse Allison said the department's home spans the entire campus. "We develop instruments on the south side of campus and then we take the new instruments to the north side of campus to compose new works for these instruments," Allison said.

Five years ago, Allison said he was brought to LSU to develop the EMDM program to upgrade the already successful computer music program that came before it.

EMDM does not only cover music, but any types of digital media a student or faculty member wants to develop. Allison said the program is constantly shifting as new technology arrives or students appear with projects they did not know were possible.

"We realized very early on that there is too much out there to know everything," Allison said. "We help them by looking at what they are doing and then apply what we can do."

One example of this practice was when EMDM took a normal poetry reading and added an interactive component for the audience. For Hurricane Katrina's anniversary last month, LSU poet and studio coordinator for Communication Across the Curriculum Vincent Cellucci asked to add a new layer to his poem "Causeway" to add a new layer to the experience, Allison said.

Allison said for the reading, assistant professor at the school of art and the center for computation and technology Derick Ostrenko and Allison worked with Cellucci to create program which required the power of a supercomputer, allowing audience to interact with the poem on their phones as Cellucci read the poem. As the audience would tap the words on their device, different sounds would play in different locations in the theatre while the words would pop up on the projection. The poem will be performed again at Digital Divide on Thursday. "It becomes more than just the poem, but a performance where everyone takes part," Allison said. "It's kind of a sensory overload, but it works well with the poem."

The times when the program excels are when EMDM collaborates with others to create new and interesting experiences, Allison said. The program is available for nearly anyone who wants to be a part of it, both undergraduates and graduate students alike. And no matter what the goal, EMDM can help get them there.

Most graduate students who join the program have a goal for what they want to accomplish, and EMDM helps them reach the goal, Allison said.

"If a student comes in as a composer, we show him or her the more technical computer science and performance aspects to help them build on their work, and vice versa," Allison said.

The undergraduate program in EMDM gives students an education base of music and technology, allowing them to move into whatever music or sound design field they want. It is a four-year Bachelor of Music degree involving different parts of sound design. One of the semesters lets students their own sound processors, composing original works for them and presenting them at a concert. "Usually, students will come into the program to learn the base material and then specialize in what they really love," Allison said. After learning the base material, the students will go into various specializations that focus on behind the scenes programming, such as movie or video game sound design; composing original works or the performance side of sonic art.

EMDM offers a three-year doctorate program for students who want to do research, make algorithms or create installations and offers the Digital Media minor for students with space for a minor if they are interested in an engineering track or arts track.

Along with the program, the university offers a place for students to practice their craft.

Allison said the digital media Center Theatre was created with the experimental music program in mind to allow students and faculty to create original pieces without compromise. The digital Media Center building was the result of 10 years of planning, and opened two years ago, he said.

The theatre's 92 speakers and an ultra-high definition 4K projection display gives the program the tools to make exactly what it wants, Allison said. Many projects created in EMDM are designed with the theatre in mind to take advantage of all of the space's resources.

"The theatre allows us to have, not only a high quality display at our disposal, but we can choose exactly where we want sound to go instead of faking where the sound is coming from," Allison said.

Thursday's event will open with a laptop orchestra using eye-tracking software named Vision Sight. Rather than singing themselves, the eye-tracking software will find where the performers look on their screens and produce vocals. There will also be pieces performed using iPad instruments created at LSU.

Digital Divide starts at 7:30 p.m. and is free to the public.

Publish Date:
9-21-2015