

At Juilliard, a Mashup of the Real and the Virtual

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NEW YORK -- In the age-old business of show business, technology is the emperor's new clothes. But the Juilliard School's upcoming Beyond the Machine concerts (March 29-April 1) use technology to create a newfound reality. Artists performing live in Tokyo, London and California will join colleagues performing live in the Rosemary and Meredith Willson Theater, a mash-up of real and virtual communication, performer-to-performer-to-audience-to-performer.

"Beyond the Machine 12.1-Synchronicity," the 12th in an annual series, is the brainchild of composer Edward Bilous, founder of Juilliard's Music Technology Center in 1993 and this year's recipient of the William Schuman Scholars Chair Award. (Full disclosure; I teach dance history at the school.)

Not surprisingly, Bilous has taken the John Cage centenary to heart, presenting three of the intrepid pioneer's works. Music Technology Center Technical Director Willie Fastenow has transcribed Cage's "Radio Music" (1956) for Internet radios, with "performers" in different countries positioned at their computers awaiting their cues in the score to turn the "dial."

Cage's "Third Construction" (1941) features three percussion quartets, playing in synchronicity in London, Tokyo and at Juilliard. A live percussionist, Samuel Budish, will perform elements of all four parts in the Willson Theater, alongside a video installation by Pilar Haile Damato.

In Cage's "Winter Music" (1957), pianists in Kakegawa, Japan; Buena Park, California; and New York will perform together, all on Yamaha Disklaviers. The two long-distance contributors will not be visible, but their keyboard actions will be, on two player-less Disklaviers onstage.

"Base Track" is a theatrical rendering of an experimental multimedia project conceived by photojournalist Teru Kuwayama. Using social media, Kuwayama and his team created a triangulated form of communication between soldiers in southern Afghanistan, embedded and non-embedded reporters, and military families. Loved ones and interested parties were able to log onto Basetrack's website and Facebook page, where they found news blogs, commentary, video and images (all captured with iPhones) about American military life in war-torn Afghanistan. While luddites complain that technologies breed isolation, in the case of Basetrack it provided an intimate hyper reality. Although the military fully supported (and vetted) Kuwayama's Basetrack project, it did find it necessary to shut down the site for

security reasons before the battalion completed its tour of duty.

Roderick Hill, a Juilliard theater division alumnus, is distilling some 1,500 pages of Facebook entries, 900 photos and 78 video interviews to adapt “Base Track” for the theater. “Trying to write a script out of tweets,” he says, “is not easy.” A cascade of projected images and videos of Marines from the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines in Helmand province, complemented by a collage of rock, heavy metal, and electronica arranged by Juilliard faculty member Michelle Dibucci, as well as a live performance of John Tavener’s “The Last Sleep of the Virgin,” will provide a backdrop for two Juilliard alumni actors portraying a reporter and a wife/mother. Hill hopes to distill, from this volcano of communication, an experience lived collectively by those who participated in the Basetrack project.

In Nick Didkovsky’s “Zero Waste,” a Juilliard pianist will sight read a score produced and projected by Didkovsky’s software program. The software then uses the pianist’s performance to create a new score.

While spectacle technology runs rampant on stages from the Met Opera (e.g., the \$16 million on the new “Ring” cycle) to Broadway (“Spider Man” costs \$1M a week to run), *Beyond the Machine* explores a fluid, syncretic world in which artists, journalists and technicians collaborate to produce art. “New technology,” says Bilious “allows us to transcend the traditional boundaries of the concert-theater experience. Today, young artists have creative possibilities at their disposal that were unimaginable only a few years ago.”