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DXARTS 462

Spring Concert Critique

The DXARTS Spring concert on May 21, 2025 featured the works of John Chowning. His music is considered a masterpiece of computer music. The pieces *Sabelithe* (1971), *Turenas* (1972), *Stria* (1977), and *Phoné* (1981) were played during the concert over the ambisonic sound system. The excitement in the room was palpable. Anyone who is knowledgeable or interested in FM digital synthesis knows how incredible his contributions to music have been, especially his pioneering work that led to the development of the Yamaha DX7, one of the most iconic and widely used synthesizers of the 1980s. He was at the forefront of these discoveries and has made remarkable contributions to the world of music and to the professors in the DXARTS department here at UW.

His piece *Stria*, built on the Golden Mean, was my favorite of the night. He projected a graphic of the tones and partials and showed the relationship visually to what we could hear all around us. That was spectacular. During his talk, he shared the mathematical equations that went into the structured spectra and pitch space. He broke down the science behind the sound, and even though it was a lot to take in, it showed his incredible grasp of the sound field and his brilliance. Another highlight was hearing his wife Maureen Chowning perform *Voices* with live electronics.

These pieces relate to the repertoire we've been studying in 460 series - in that many of them emerged during a time of rapid discovery in computer music. He made significant contributions in terms of spatialization, psychoacoustics, and algorithmic composition.

His work also connects directly to our own creative tools and practices. In class, we often use SinOsc as a building block for synthesis, just like Chowning did in his early FM experiments. The sine

wave is deceptively simple, yet it contains infinite expressive potential when it is shaped through modulation. Hearing how Chowning transformed basic waveforms into rich, evolving textures felt like validation of our own explorations in SuperCollider. It reminded me that even with minimal materials, like a single oscillator, you can achieve deeply expressive results when you're guided by careful design and a strong sense of listening.

Denis Smalley's *Wind Chimes* (1987), which we studied in 461, felt closely connected to Chowning's work. Both use space as a core musical element, Chowning simulates sound moving around the listener, while Smalley creates the sense of chimes drifting and shimmering through space. They also share a deep focus on timbre. Chowning sculpts his sounds through FM synthesis, while Smalley transforms recordings of real objects. Despite their different tools, both create immersive sonic environments that invite deep, focused listening.

Seeing Chowning in person brought all of this full circle. His music doesn't sit still in a museum, it continues to ripple through contemporary practices in sound art, spatial music, and synthesis. The DXARTS department's decision to center this concert around him felt both celebratory and inspiring. It reminded us that behind every tool or technique is an artist driven by curiosity, precision, and deep listening. It was an honor to witness it live and to meet this incredible artist.