

## Comforting Cacophony at ‘Garden of Memory’ in Oakland

By Sam Lefebvre | JUNE 22, 2016



*John Benson performs with his milk-covered drum at Garden of Memory. (Kristin Shaw)*

The conventions of live musical performance haven't changed much over the last several centuries, what with an audience inevitably oriented toward a stage and a series of sets punctuated by applause. Despite a few rebellions, the very architecture of every new venue constructed continues to enforce a rigid code of conduct, one that emphasizes, above all else, patience.

Which helps explain the exceptional thrill of Garden of Memory, the carnival of sound and vision held annually in Oakland's stately Chapel of the Chimes columbarium on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. On Tuesday night, dozens of performances occur throughout the labyrinthine structure at once. No set demands any more investment than listeners wish to give. Attendees interested in experimental music but leery of the rigor it's thought to require need not worry: Garden of Memory encourages patrons to wander, to welcome distraction, and ideally get lost.

At this year's event, Rova Saxophone Quartet beckons with the brassy swagger of a jazz orchestra, but Entartete Ensemble's gossamer understatement inspires a detour. Pamela Z, awash in natural light, seamlessly loops and stitches together a vibrant choral work. John Benson reprises the setup that's haunted this writer since last year: an upturned bass drum lit from below and covered in a shallow pool of milk, which quivers and gushes to a deep drone. Hallways teem with chatter. Errant melodies escape their designated alcoves. Children sprint past elders who gingerly navigate the stone steps; the disparate generations appear to have struck a truce.

At all times, Garden of Memory is comfortingly cacophonous, reminiscent of the inimitable polyphony that emerges on rare occasions in the hallway of a bustling rehearsal complex. The event concludes with a participatory bell-ringing ceremony that sounds so much like chimes and rain that it threatens, in fittingly pagan fashion, to invoke thunder.



Rova Saxophone Quartet at 'Garden of Memory' in Oakland, June 21, 2016. (Photo: Kristin Shaw)

To produce the first Garden of Memory in 1996, celebrated Berkeley pianist and composer Sarah Cahill partnered with the small non-profit New Music Bay Area, then known as 20th Century Forum. At first, it was free and familial, featuring Cahill and her peers. Though attendance has swelled to thousands in recent years, ticket prices remain humble and the organization, simple: expenses hover around \$1,000, and proceeds are divided evenly among performers.

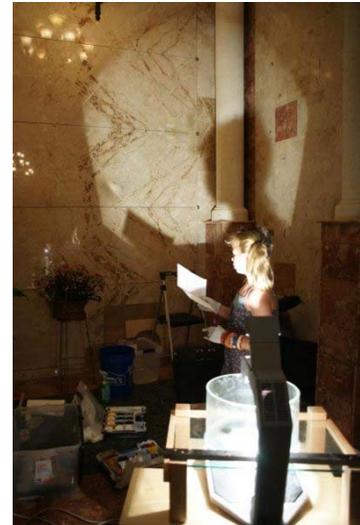
Like the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, the programming at Garden of Memory reflects the porosity between academic and underground experimental music circles in the Bay Area, where scrappy tabletop noise artists and renowned performers intersect and commingle at museums and warehouses alike. This is largely on account of Mills College, which seems to cyclically inject life and restless energy into Oakland clubs and performing arts spaces.

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To wit, Garden of Memory features co-director of Mills' Center for Contemporary Music Maggi Payne, who presides over a sort of theremin workshop in one nook; and faculty member William Winant, the versatile and acclaimed percussionist, who both leads his own group and performs a piece by the maverick 20th century composer Lou Harrison with Cahill and violinist Kate Stenberg. Cahill then plays an early, little-known composition by Harrison, all smoky chord clusters set to a cool, stuttering groove. (The sheet music was recently discovered in Mills' library.)

First-time performers include Mills alum Sharmi Basu, who makes seething, charred electronic music as Beast Nest. Here, however, her set is relatively restrained, composed of aqueous, gleaming textures with a nevertheless dark luster. And behind her is dancer Alexander Zander Brown, who strikes angular poses and undulates beneath a gold shawl. Programming is proposal-based, but many of the same performers participate every year; as Basu and Brown show, more inaugural appearances would be welcomed.

For many artists, the atmosphere seems to encourage whimsical ideas. In the best case, this looks something like Randy Porter's corner: a thicket of plastic tubes, mounted horns, and a rickety organ that appears to fold up into a box and sounds great when he strikes it with a hammer.



At Garden of Memory in Oakland, June 21, 2016. (Kristin Shaw)

It's important not to overstate the evening's levity. To be sure, were the programming to take direct inspiration from Chapel of the Chimes' practical purposes — incinerating corpses, stowing remains — it would quickly devolve into parody. But it's still a solemn, aching piece called "No Stolen Sisters" — written and performed by saxophonist Phillip Greenleaf to honor and acknowledge the indigenous women "disappeared" at alarming rates in recent years — that proves particularly resonant.

Using circular breathing, Greenleaf performs for four hours. This is at palpable physical expense; his face discolors and spittle settles around his mouthpiece. Over time, his exertion inflects and skews the instrument's timbre, conjuring a sort of spectral lament. And in that moment, having idly strolled and passively listened all evening, suddenly patience is less of a chore and more of a pathway.