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Performances set for solstice fest

By Jesse Hamlin | June 5, 2018

Maggi Payne, the electro-acoustic composer and performer who has co-directed Mills College's invaluable Center for Contemporary Music for nearly 30 years, has played all but one of the Garden of Memory summer solstice celebrations at Oakland's landmark Chapel of the Chimes since the festivities began in 1999.

She doesn't recall the year she missed the free public celebration, which features artists of many stripes performing in the gardens, chapels and alcoves of the maze-like columbarium and mausoleum, but she remembers the reason: The fountain at the heart of her piece "Fountain" was on the fritz.

On June 21, from 5 to 9 p.m., when scores of notable musicians like pianist **Sarah Cahill**, clarinetist **Beth Custer**, the vocal ensemble **Kitka**, the **William Winant Percussion Group** and **Living Earth Show** perform simultaneously around the serene setting, Payne plans to be back in the Garden of St. Mark with her 2013 piece "Theremin Morph." It's an interactive work for theremin, the electronic instrument whose pitch and volume players control by moving their hands closer or farther from its two antennae.

Payne, who built her little theremin from a kit she bought decades ago, has rigged it with a Morpheus digital synthesizer, an M-Audio Trigger Finger and other devices that allow the usually ethereal theremin to sound like a drum set, vibes or something else. The pitch and rhythm change according to the proximity and motion of the person playing it.

"Their bodies become part of the circuit, and they influence the pitch," Payne says. "The way I have it set up, you don't have to be anywhere near an expert to get some great things happening with it. It's very accessible."

Presented by New Music Bay Area and Chapel of the Chimes, the solstice bash has become a summer classic.

"I love the diversity of the crowds, and being able to talk with them, and coach them when they're trying to play the theremin," Payne says. "It's so much fun. We've had people holding babies in their arms, moving them closer and farther from the antenna. It's hilarious and wonderful. We get people in their 90s as well."

Payne's trigger device lets her switch the character of the sound unexpectedly, often to the delight of the person sweeping his or her hand or foot in front of it.

"If I hit one button, it sounds like a drum kit. Another button, it's vibes. Another, electronic twirly stuff — one of my faves," she says. "I watch the way people are interacting with the theremin; if it looks like they'd be really cool on drums, I switch it that way."

She wants people to explore the sound "and just have fun with it — the magic of being able to wave your hand and have that change what you're hearing."

Payne doesn't get to hear other musicians at Garden of Memory, but always digs the sound of bells at twilight, courtesy of **Brenda Hutchinson's** sunset bell-ringing ritual. For more information, go to www.gardenofmemory.com.



Photo: Courtesy Styrouse

Composer Maggi Payne is bringing her interactive theremin performance to this year's Garden of Memory celebration.

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