

'Sonic Waters': Feel Of Music From The Depths

By MATT DAMSKER

Entertainment Writer, The San Diego Union

A big blue plastic blob — a pop-art jellyfish — floats at the deep end of the pool, trailing streamers laden with mirrored glass and Day-Glo tape. All around it and throughout the pool, about 100 people are bobbing and drifting head down or face up.

The uninformed eye might judge it to be the latest in Southern California cult worship, or perhaps a new form of aquatic therapy for the comatose. But it's only a musical event, and the hundred floaters are only concertgoers.

From above pool level, all you hear is a vague electronic sound. But stick your head in the pool and the sound clarifies, magically, into a crystalline pattern of sonic squiggles, beeps and drones that ebb and flow with a sea-like rhythm. It's the strange water music of a million "wet fantasies," as its composer, a 30-year-old Frenchman named Michel Redolfi, likes to suggest. If this catches on, he could be drawing concertgoers to swimming pools as easily as Rod Stewart packs the Sports Arena.

Redolfi plays down such ambitions. But the composer has been making waves in the collegiate community of late with these underwater concerts — "Sonic Waters," he calls them — and this past weekend on the UCSD campus he attracted four more poolfuls of students, plus a few intrepid reporters who had to leave their skepticism in the locker room with their street clothes.

This one, for example, floated and floundered in appropriate concert attire: a pair of blue Jantzen swim trunks (no pleats), scuba mask and snorkel by U.S. Divers Co. (the Jacques Cousteau models).

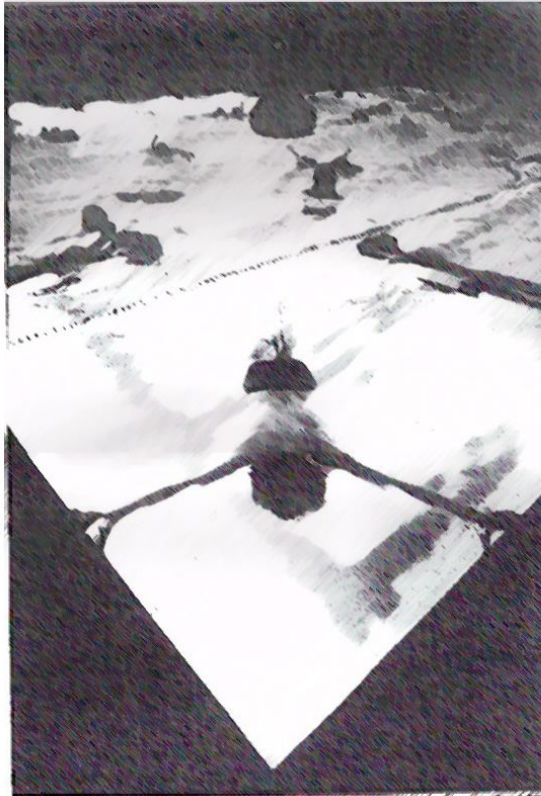
It was good: 60 weightless minutes in a womb-warm pool, drifting with a bunch of drifting bodies, not so much listening as feeling the sound, for you don't hear music in water quite the way you hear it in the air.

Redolfi's music is perceived only when your head is in contact with the water; this allows your inner ears a direct pickup of the sound waves as they bypass your eardrums and vibrate your bones, via special underwater speakers that hang from the plastic "jellyfish."

This "bone conduction" process, as Redolfi terms it, makes the crucial difference: It's as if you are the music more so than the music's auditor — it literally inhabits your body. Composed on sophisticated digital computers and performed either live or, in the case of the weekend's UCSD concerts, on prerecorded tape, the music blends purely synthesized sound with the natural voicings of flute and other instruments.

If it seems a stunt or a passing novelty, a chat with Redolfi says otherwise. This affable man from Marseilles has not only pioneered the concept of underwater music, he receives a large grant from the French government to pursue it as a composer-in-residence at UCSD's Center for Music Experiment.

"It seems that the more experimental



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'We are really somebody different when we listen in the water,' says Michel Redolfi, left, by a UCSD pool filled with floating concertgoers. 'The sound distortion that results from bone conduction dictates your choice of timbres, so you can't get a good effect with regular music. And psychologically, you have the simulation of zero-gravity, a sense of waking-and-sleeping, a different kind of sensitivity.'

contemporary music becomes, the more boring it becomes for the public, and it shouldn't!" he affirms. "It's usually presented in traditional halls, where you wear uncomfortable clothes and either have the best seats or the worst ones. I wanted a form of music that addressed this physical problem."

The concept began forming in his mind four years ago, when he first came to San Diego. "I went swimming one day, and it struck me that there was so much underwater sound around me — the shrimps clicking, and so on — as opposed to the Mediterranean sea I'd known in Marseilles. The ocean is very dead and polluted there."

At first, Redolfi experimented with bringing this natural sound up from the depths, using special underwater microphones and computer synthesis. This resulted in two major compositions, "Pacific Tubular Waves" and "Immersion," which have been released on record.

Redolfi's next, more radical, step was to turn the idea around, bringing artificial sound into the water — and the listening public along with it. Last year at La Jolla Cove, he presented his first underwater concert, blending his computer-generated sounds with the natural sounds of the cove.

From there, he began to refine the process for more manageable swimming-pool presentations. This allows for a multimedia approach — underwater spotlights, bubbles generated by chunks of dry ice, a real theater of the sea.

"We are really somebody different when we listen in the water," Redolfi says. "The sound distortion that results from bone conduction dictates your choice of timbres, so you can't get a good effect with regular music. And psychologically, you have the simulation of zero-gravity, a sense of waking-and-sleeping, a different kind of sensitivity. People say my music sounds natural in the water, but they'd switch it off if they heard it on the radio. And that's the kind of reaction I'm hoping for."

The reactions from the student concertgoers at the UCSD pool were uniformly positive, and seemed stimulated by a sense of revelation. "Very musical, very reverberant quality," judged Dan Cox, 23, an electrical engineering major at UCSD who composes his own electronic music. "I expected a lot less, actually, but there was a lot going on — it developed tension and released it, like Beethoven in a way."

"I would like to do it again," said Stephan Greber, 28, a German exchange student majoring in set design at UCSD's theater department. "To me, it is two things at once: music and sport. The music has a glasslike sound — brilliant, prismatic, spectral."

And Laurie Melvin, 19, an applied physics major at the university, rhapsodized: "I closed my eyes and could feel every part of my body in a state of suspension. If you could avoid bumping all the other bodies, it was great. I thought, this must be the way you'd hear and feel if you were a porpoise or a sea anemone."