

Swim-suited audience hears world underwater premier

NZPA

Hanover,
New Hampshire

With lifeguards as ushers and a giant vinyl jellyfish anchored at centre stage, 150 people donned bathing suits and stuck their heads into a pool for a concert — underwater.

With the help of 30 theatrical spotlights, 46kg of dry ice and three years of research, a composer, Michel Redolfi, produced his "Sonic Waves" show in a Dartmouth College pool last week. The hour-long concert was billed as "the closest thing to listening in space" and was the first of its kind in the country.

Members of the audience, some wearing snorkels, floated or swam in the 1.14 million-litre pool, a buzzing, beeping, whirring world of electronic sound.

"I heard it all," said Ed Mead. "Crustaceans, cetaceans, star wars, K.G.B. submarines. It absolutely runs the gamut of every underwater sound you've ever heard."

The performance relied not just on sounds but on the way they are heard.

"The listening is produced by bone conduction — sound waves through the water through the skin, which is 80 per cent water," Redolfi said. "Your skull and your full body vibrate to the sound. So the music comes from inside."

It was the third underwater concert by Redolfi, a native of France who is researching music at the University of California at San Diego. He said the show here was his first commercial performance produced with a full complement of theatrical regalia.

"The public is going to have something quite new — a new music in a new environment," said Redolfi, who is 30. "It's neither a gimmick nor a happening. This is setting a new way to listen to music and a new way to be in public, a new social gathering."

Some were attracted by

the chance to duck out of the below-zero New Hampshire cold into a pool heated to 35deg. "Partly what attracted me is that it's warm," said Sandy Fish, a Hanover nurse. "This is my tropical vacation this winter."

The concert also drew reporters — more than two dozen in all, including a television crew with scuba gear and underwater cameras.

Above the water, Redolfi's music was distant and tinny. Below the surface, three suspended speakers enveloped the audience in eerie sound.

"It sounded like screams and it was coming from everywhere," said Natasha Stanfill, aged 11.

"All I can think of is being in the womb," said Grace McGorrigan, a Dartmouth medical student.

That aspect, said Redolfi, is "so evident that I fear to say it."

The composer said one of his aims is to fracture the

formality of modern music.

"Recently more and more contemporary music has been institutionalised and got quite formal," he said. "When serious music was coming in people were sitting in their chairs. So this is a way to do this more comfortably."

Redolfi created the low-voltage sound system — designed to prevent shocks — with the aid of a Navy engineer. The music came from a synthesiser co-invented by Jon Appleton, a Dartmouth music professor who organised Redolfi's show.

It was not exactly music to all the listeners. "It sounds a lot like electronic noises," Ms Fish said. "But if you just close your eyes and float around it's like exploring some place that's not here."

The audience's response did not surprise Redolfi. "This is their first contact with the water this way," he said. "Not for swimming, not for washing, but for listening."