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Music

A bathing costume to wear at the opera

IT IS everyone agrees, an odd feeling to be floating in semi-naked limbo above a group of musicians as they tap away on space-age instruments. But this, it is predicted, is to be a cultural commonplace of the 21st century, and, although it sounds more like a scene from a science fiction film, it was also the scenario in Lisbon this summer.

It began like any other night at the opera, the only difference being that the venue was the municipal swimming pool and the audience, having taken their seats for an introductory speech, suddenly exchanged their tuxedos for swimming costumes and bathing trunks and took to the water.

This was the world's first performance of an underwater opera, a concept pioneered by a Frenchman, Michel Redolfi, who is trying to redefine the entire process of musical perception.

"When music is played in water the audience starts vibrating with the resonance," he explained. "You listen with your body instead of with your ears."

Whether it is the promise of heightened artistic awareness or plain curiosity that has lured audiences is hard to say, but the French, Portuguese and Americans have been queuing up to take the plunge since Redolfi began his underwater concerts in 1981. "Most people are on a high at the end of a performance," said Redolfi.

Anna Tims goes for a dip in Lisbon's municipal swimming pool to soak up Michel Redolfi's music

"Their ecstasies have nothing to do with my music. For the first time they are experiencing music coming from within them rather than from outside. The act of listening becomes creative rather than passive."

When a performance is scheduled, Redolfi and his team take over an entire swimming pool complex for a week and redesign it for the occasion. Particular attention is paid to the ceiling which provides the only scenery as members of the audience lie on their backs with their ears in the water.

"This does have one very distinct advantage over conventional concerts," said Redolfi. "If you get bored, you just have to stick your head out of the water and you can't hear a thing."

Some come equipped with scuba equipment to join the musicians underwater, others drift on floats or cling to the side of the pool which is specially warmed to 33C and fitted with four waterproof amplifiers.

The performers don oxygen cylinders and lead-weighted belts and drop to the bottom of the pool with their instruments. Alex Grillo, the percussionist, plays a pair of bronze gongs suspended from a vast portico like a butterfly's wing. The gongs are equipped with small



microphones which activate synthesizers on the surface, the tones of which are diffused into the water.

Redolfi, meanwhile, operates a waterproof console to mix the different sound levels. "This is vital because the movement of the bathers disturbs the sound flow. It's the same effect as a hurricane in an outdoor concert, so I have to regulate these tonal evolutions."

Redolfi has spent years developing instruments and a repertoire to suit aquatic conditions. "Composing for water is different from composing for air," he said. "When our two sopranos Susan Belling and Yumi Nara



Heavy metal: Alex Grillo plays percussion, above, and Michel Redolfi, inset, operates a waterproof console to mix the sound levels

approached me and said they wanted to sing under water I said they were crazy, for it would just sound like a flow of bubbles."

However, a solution presented itself in the form of French architect Jacques Rougerie who specialises in underwater hotels for the next century.

He designed a large bubble to accommodate the singers at the bottom of the pool. The French sculptor Sacha Sosno created the portico of blades inspired by

Tibetan gongs. Each blade is composed of bronze, silver and titanium, a combination which transmits sounds most effectively in water.

Redolfi was left to develop a style of music which would work in water. Although he has composed several works for underwater performances, his latest work, *Crysalis*, is his first attempt at an opera. "The pacing is very different in an aquatic environment. You have to find

the right timbres which will resonate through the whole body. Deep bass notes have no effect in water. You have to compose with your head mentally beneath the surface, for if the same music were played in a concert hall it would sound very monotonous indeed with not much variation in tone."

Redolfi is busy preparing for yet another operatic production in the Olympic pool in Lille next autumn and a three-week

installation in Brussels in March will allow visitors to immerse themselves at any hour of the day and hear a sub-aquatic performance. He is convinced that they will be hooked once they have tried it.

"It's like plunging through Alice in Wonderland's looking glass," he said. "Before this, who would have imagined flying over the heads of performers on a swell of music? It's like bringing dreams to life."

SPERRE PERRIN / SYGMA