

Underwater concert is unusual, relaxing...and all wet!



Claire Trecia relaxes while enjoying Michel Redolfi's underwater concert. Below: Two music fans ready to come up for air.

Music lovers get in swim of things

By CARL URQUHART
Special to The Gazette

Time was when going to a concert was a fairly reliable proposition. You put on your best bib and tucker, arrived at the concert hall, sat in a chair, listened to the performance and then went home.

But, if Michel Redolfi's concert on Saturday evening at the University of Montreal is any indication, those times appear to be changing.

Concerts are often held by the university's faculty of music or at the Salle Claude Champagne in Outremont. But in the sports department?

Organizers of the event assured me it was the right location, as this was the first underwater concert ever to take place in Montreal or, in fact, in all of Canada. The music to be heard, entitled *Fluide et Sonique*, would consist of the synthesized sounds of Redolfi, a young French composer who has conducted similar experiments in various pools and bodies of water around the world.

Consequently, I arrived at the gymnasium about 8:45 and, being assured by those in authority that there had been absolutely no casualties at an earlier performance, decided to risk all.

Snorkels, we were told, were available, but were recommend-

ed for seasoned snorkelers only. "No one," said the lady in charge, "wants to be disturbed by a drowning in the middle of a concert."

The initial reaction to finding oneself at a concert in a swim suit is not, as was suggested, to move about in response to the music. My first instinct was to assume a kind of crouching position and, like the hermit crab, to look longingly about for the first shell in which to hide.

A kind of high-pitched sound seemed to be issuing from the top of the water and upon lowering one's ears into the pool it was discovered to be a most bizarre noise, as if one was being whistled at by a distant myna bird.

After the first shock, however, I relaxed and began to concentrate on the various sounds that Redolfi had pre-taped on his *Synklavier* and which were projected from several "water-speakers" on the bottom of the pool. The music ranges from a mere trickle of blurs and bleeps to flute-like melodies, all of which were projected at very discreet levels to the listeners.

Redolfi's theory is that the body, being made up of a large percentage of water, is in its natural element when submerged, and is therefore much more re-

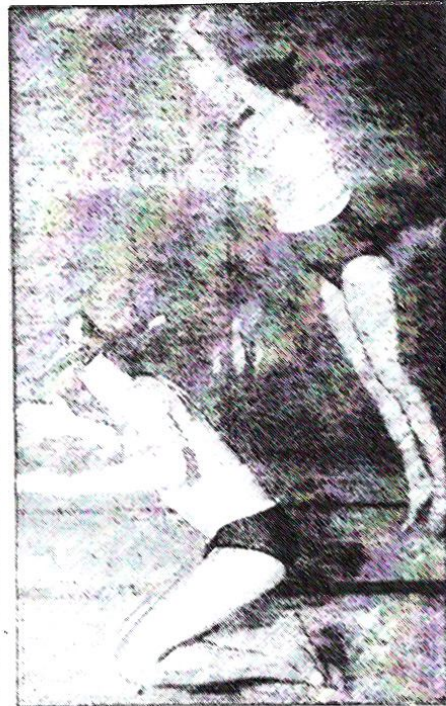
ceptive to sounds than in the standard concert hall. The ears, in fact, become secondary sources of hearing and sounds enter the skull directly, a phenomenon I experienced by plugging my ears.

Other than the occasional inconvenience of becoming entangled in the snorkeling equipment of fellow-listeners, the concert went smoothly and was a real hoot and a holler. The actual music, though, that eddied and swirled about for the better part of an hour, tended to lack variety and seemed to do little to explore the wet acoustics of the setting.

The question that now looms in everyone's mind is whether the some 300 people who attended the event will be able to make the transition back to the more restricted atmosphere of a concert hall like the Salle Wilfrid Pelletier of Place des Arts where we must breathe normally, listen with our ears and actually face the music.

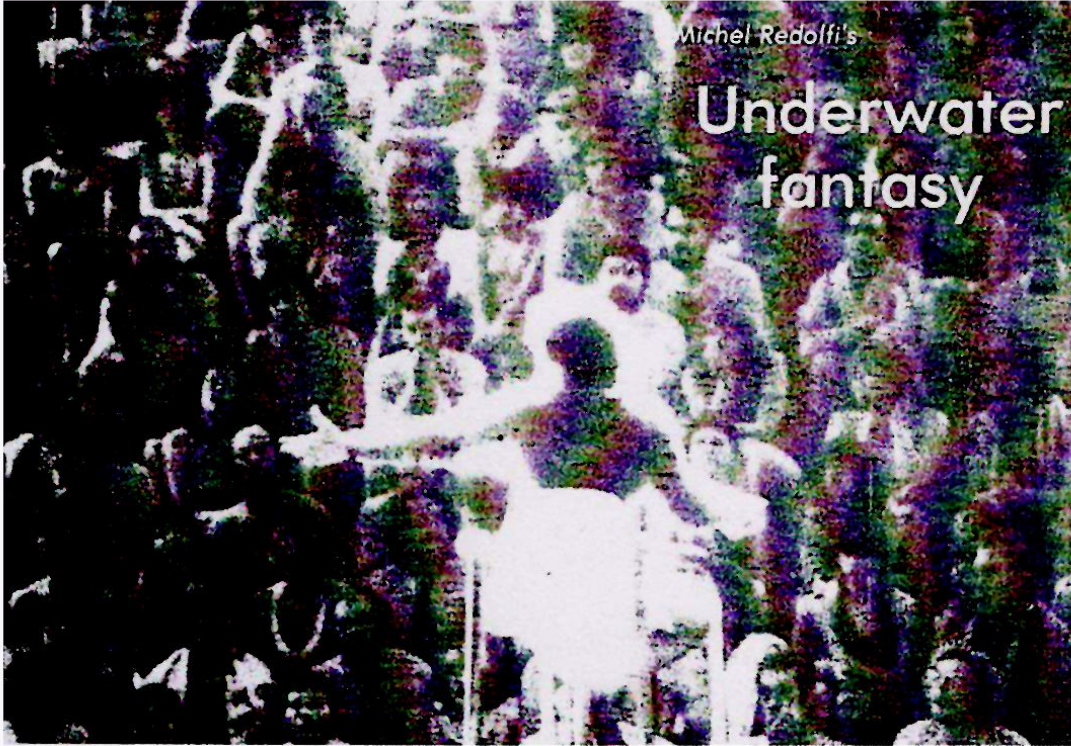
It may be a long, slow process, but I strongly suspect most of us will.

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Michel Redolfi's

Underwater fantasy

300 float to composer's music

By ELIZABETH HAYHOW
Gazette writer

HOUGHTON — Consider the supreme relaxing experience — floating gently in 90-degree water. The lights are low and mellow music vibrates through your body.

Three hundred people experienced that pleasure when they traded their regular clothes for bathing suits and snorkels to attend two underwater concerts Tuesday night at Michigan Tech's Student Development Complex.

The concert was produced by French composer Michel Redolfi, who calls himself an experimental musician. He composes music to be heard underwater. The music is played on an electronic synthesizer called the Synclavier II.

The music, said John Allison, an MTU chemistry professor and amateur musician, has the "typical sound of electronic music: it sounds like organ, bird sounds, orchestral music on occasion, pings here and there."

"It's a wonderful soothing effect when you're floating in water," Allison said after the concert. "It's difficult to describe... It's sort of like being in a tropical jungle, almost-an odd bird noise, the sound of an animal, wind in the trees. Lazy afternoon type music."

Redolfi said he is "always trying to explore new sounds, new instruments. I also realized that new sounds are not enough to bring to the public; we needed a new way to listen."

Water came to mind because Redolfi has always been around it. He was born in Marseilles, France, on the Mediterranean Sea and moved four years ago to San Diego, Cal., where he is a researcher in music at the University of San Diego. He is a swim-

mer and a diver.

"It was obvious; the only way to bring the experience to the public is through water," he told the Gazette this week. "I couldn't bring the ocean to the people so I bring the water to the people through pools."

Early experiments proved the idea had merit. Redolfi put some speakers in the Pacific Ocean at San Diego, but didn't tell anybody. The regular crowd at the beach was surprised to find a musical ocean.

But the ultimate concert hall for underwater music is the swimming pool, he said. "You can control everything," he said, "light, heat, sound. It makes the concert stable."

He spends several hours before a concert placing 40 special underwater speakers around the pool, including several on what looks like a giant inflated jellyfish in the center. And the pool is heated up before the concert.

"Ninety degree water is very important," he said. "When you float you are almost motionless. If the water is not 90 degrees you lose heat. If you're shivering you don't enjoy."

Redolfi speaks highly of the SDC pool. "Technically this is the best of my three performances so far. Pools are like concert halls; there are good concert halls and bad concert halls. The 'V' shape (of the pool bottom) here is a wonderful shape."

Lighting plays an important role in the underwater concert environment. Redolfi shuts off the overhead fluorescent lights during the concert, and uses special stage and laser lighting. "I want people bathing in a mellow atmosphere," he said. "It's not a rock concert; there are no rocks."

The red laser beam, provided by Michigan Tech engineers and reflecting the music, was projected in moving patterns on

the ceiling. For the lighting, Redolfi said, "This a world premiere."

"The music is controlled by the composer and a computer. Redolfi calls the music fluid, "so liquid, so transparent it blends in the water. I believe strongly the less you try to direct attention (to the music) the better (people) create their own fantasy, their own movements. If you have hard rock in water, there's no magic."

And how did Redolfi and his underwater concert make their way to the cold of the Copper Country? A friend of Redolfi's, Jon Appleton of the Bregman Electrical Music Studio at Dartmouth College, performed at Michigan Tech in 1980, according to Valerie Pegg, cultural affairs coordinator.

When he returned last spring, he told Pegg about a bizarre event a friend was planning — an underwater concert. Appleton told Pegg that Redolfi was going to present a concert at Dartmouth, and perhaps he could stop in Houghton on his way back to in San Diego.

Redolfi agreed. Pegg said ticket sales for the concert moved slowly at first, but when people got wind of the unusual event, sales increased, and the event sold out three days in advance.

Redolfi recently recorded an album titled "Immersion — Pacific Tubular Waves," produced by the French Institut National de l'Audiovisuel for which he won the 1979 Luigi Russolo Prize in International Competition. The prizewinning piece of music prompted the French government to subsidize further experimentation by Redolfi involving the testing and documenting of underwater sounds.

And what's next for the underwater concerts? Redolfi wants to provide a live performance — a soprano singing underwater. "I'm working on that right now," he said.



Photos by Bob Hallinen
and Charlie Eshbach

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