

MUSIC

Capturing the cicadas' songs of love

By John von Rhein
Tribune music critic

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Appearing LIVE and in REAL TIME, on a computer near you -- it's the MATING CONCERTO OF THE CICADAS!!!

You city dwellers who are feeling deprived of the action now that gazillions of 17-year cicadas are literally drumming up sex in suburban trees and bushes -- at decibel levels that rival the Chicago Symphony Orchestra brass section at full cry -- take heart.

With a click of your mouse, you can access the hissing drone that is the love call of the red-eyed little critters, the latest wrinkle in the summer's sonic wallpaper.

For that you can thank Peter Gena.

He's the guy who set up a microphone outside a window to the leafy back yard of his Glenview home, attached it to a computer and is making it possible for anyone in the world with access to a sound-equipped computer to hear Chicago's cicadas at play. Now, they aren't playing all the time, so eavesdropping isn't always possible.

Listening in

The cicada songs may not have the soul of a Barry White ballad, or the pristine craft of a Bach Two-Part Invention, but they do make you an "earwitness" to one of the rarest and oddest of Mother Nature's reproductive spectacles.

Gena, 60, a composer and pianist who has taught electronic and computer music, music history and computer programming at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1983, finds beauty in the insects' mating music where others find only white noise.

A disciple of John Cage, the supreme guru of avant-garde music in the 20th Century, and the author of several books on Cage, he has long subscribed to Cage's famous dictum that everything we do -- and, by extension, every sound in nature -- is music. All we have to do is listen to our environment, and listen to someone working with the sounds around us.

That's where Gena comes in. He frequently partners with artists operating in fields outside his own to create elaborate interactive artworks such as "Passages," a permanent installation that will occupy a 90-foot corridor of the Technology Building at the College of Lake County in Grayslake. The installation is scheduled to open later this month.

He's also involved in three made-in-Chicago streaming-audio works for the Locus Sonus Audio Streaming Project, a Web site operated by colleagues at an art school in Aix-en-Provence, France, with whom he is devising "virtual" trans-Atlantic courses, live over the Internet.

Gena says he failed to record the last invasion of the 17-year cicadas in 1990 and was determined not to make the same mistake again.

In the back yard

Living near the Cook County Forest Preserve, with miles of wooded area literally at his fingertips, he need venture only as far as his back yard to catch the booming sonic symphony that signals the demise of one generation of the insects and the eventual rebirth of another.

"The sound begins each morning with this incredible din of thousands of insect bodies vibrating all at once. It's like a warble and a rumble at the same time, like nothing you've ever heard," Gena says. "Then you hear the sounds closer by, filled with these wonderful subtleties of beats, volume, all kinds of acoustical phenomena. If it weren't so loud -- it's getting close to deafening by now -- it would be music suitable for meditation."

The frolic promises to continue from dawn to dusk through the end of June, or whenever the mating ritual is completed. The females lay their eggs in the trees, the nymphs hatch, they fall to the ground and they bore into the earth, where they will stay for another 17 summers.

As Gena was speaking over the phone from his home, he watched the cicadas flying in amorous circles outside his open window. "There goes one now!" he exclaimed, as one brushed his face.

"John Cage would have found this a delightful sound source, not to be interfered with but just to listen to."

Advertisement

To access the cicada stream, visit the site at nujus.net/~locusonus/site/streams/mapcreacast.php

You will see a blurry world map. Click on the lowest box by Chicago. It will be colored orange if the audio stream is on. (The male cicadas only vibrate their tiny internal drums between roughly 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., usually only on warm days.) When the new box appears, click start. Those whose computers are equipped with Java programming software can call up the streaming audio most easily.

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