

Players >

MICHAEL DESSEN

Interactive Systems



BILL DOUTHART

In an era where technology erases old truths about our world at a blistering pace, Michael Dessen is a musician for this moment. Follow his work, and you might see him play a show with musicians on another continent. Listen to his latest album, *Resonating Abstractions*, and you'll hear his trombone control otherworldly sounds with the aid of a specially programmed computer.

"[The computer] isn't about allowing me to play more notes—it's a way to add more colors to what I'm doing," Dessen said from his office at the University of California's Irvine campus. "There's a kind of gradient, spectral quality to the trombone as an instrument, and it lends itself to this sort of exploration because of the way it works. The computer opens up possibilities in timbre that I wouldn't have otherwise."

The title *Resonating Abstractions* nods to the fact that the album's seven tracks were partially inspired by the visual art of seven contemporary abstract painters.

The album features bassist Christopher Tordini and drummer Dan Weiss, whom Dessen enjoys working with not only for their virtuosity, but also for their sense of sound. "They can handle complex structures, but they also improvise tim-

brally and sonically," he explained. "With recordings, it's not just about the chords and rhythm and melody; it's about the sound, too, and they can take it in a lot of different directions, whether I'm using the computer or not. What distinguishes this band is a combination of very open forms of improvisation with highly composed written materials—it's hard to tell when we're improvising and when we're not—and we combine that with technology in real time."

Rather than produce simple effects in the manner of an octave pedal, for instance, Dessen programs entire systems that give him a wide range of options. "The first thing I do with the computer in this band is process the sound I'm playing," he said. "I use a modified mute to send the sound to the computer, and it comes out sounding like a flock of geese. I'm using the trombone to control these strange sounds. The other thing I do with the computer is create sound worlds that do unexpected things. I might record a hundred little half-second gestures on the trombone, then write a program that will improvise with them."

Dessen sees technology as a partner to creativity, with the desire for more capabilities pushing new technology, and that technology in turn

changing the way people think about what's possible. His telematics concerts—featuring musicians in multiple locations playing in real time via online video feed—push him to adapt the way he composes. The effect can be strikingly immediate.

"When you get more than a couple hundred miles away, you start to notice a delay. You can't quite groove together in the same way," Dessen said. "I've done pieces where we had a band in California creating a groove as a unit, with the band in New York playing something that relates to that but has its own internal time structure. You can create some really interesting effects. It's about making music that fits the new medium rather than just replicating what we'd be doing otherwise. I think telepresence technology will change the way we understand music."

For his next project, Dessen is trying to integrate the computer further into the band. "The computer is drawing on a database of scores I composed, and it's listening to us," he said. "If we get really loud, it might go to this section. I'm trying to create interactive systems where there's a lot of flow among different agents, the people, the score, the computer. It's a big space where we can all improvise together." —Joe Tangari