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DEFEND YOURSELF!

CHRISTINE SOUTHWORTH

By Luke O'Neil

The Museum of Science's "Music and the Invasion of Technology" showcase is from the future. Literally. Well, not literally. Technically, it's in the future, but soon it will be here—and thank goodness, because it sounds crazy. For this premiere performance, Christine Southworth has composed music for robots and humans to play together.

WHY WOULD YOUR AVERAGE MUSIC FAN WANT TO SEE THIS?

This is going to be a totally unique and very fun performance. We're combining a traditional Balinese gamelan, electric guitar, amplified and processed violin, bass, and the antique wind-synth, Lyricon, with four brand-new robotic instruments—to make rocking music unlike any before. It's a one-time performance, so this is the only chance to see it!

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT WATCHING ROBOTS PERFORM?

In the age of lip-synching, maybe not much ... Seriously, two of our robots don't move very much—but they light up as they play notes. Our two new robots, the TuBot and the Bot(i)Cello, will move a lot! The TuBot is a tetrahedron made of air cylinders, driven by compressed air. Each of the six sides can independently change from two feet to four feet long, so it dances between numerous shapes and orientations. It's very beautiful and really exciting! It plays antique organ pipes as it moves. The Bot(i)Cello also dances, and it sounds like a slew of intense electric guitars.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF LISTENING TO ROBOT MUSIC?

The robots are physical beings, making sounds the way humans have always made sounds—hitting things, plucking strings, blowing air through pipes. This is visual and visceral, and it brings the electronics to life. Also, it means we're dealing with acoustic sound, and no synthesizer or sampler can match that.

DRAWBACKS?

They crash and you have to restart them. Also, carbon-based musicians (i.e., humans) can respond to amazingly subtle cues from other players, slight variations in tempo or dynamics or expression, and the robots can't really do this—they pretty much follow orders.

DO THE HUMAN MUSICIANS IN THE SHOW EVER GET JEALOUS OF THE ROBOTS?

Not unless they'd prefer to be attacked with screwdrivers and have code typed into their heads.

["Music and the Invasion of Technology," is on Wednesday, 1.25.06, at Cahn's Theater in the Museum of Science, Science Park, Boston. 617.723.2500. 7pm/\$10 (includes dessert reception with the composers). www.mos.org/art]