

MUSIC REVIEW

An ode to 'Forbidden Planet'

Four artists don't conquer new worlds in their offerings but honor the spirit of the classic sci-fi film.

By MARK SWED
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"Forbidden Planet," the beloved science-fiction film, lives on. After 50 years, this "Tempest"-based tale, which gave us Robby the Robot, may seem a tad dated, its fantasy no longer foreboding. But who in Hollywood today would dare to make a feature film with a sophisticated all-electronic score?

The soundtrack, by Bebe Barron and her engineer husband, Louis — called not "music" in the credits but "electronic tonalities" — may have done more than anything to popularize electronic music, which in 1956 belonged exclusively to the university and the avant-garde recording studio.

Carefully made, the score showed that beeps, burps and bubbling could signify more than the unknown or the future. They could, like traditional music, convey character, feeling and drama.

These "tonalities" help keep the film fresh. And they continue to inspire composers, as was evident in "A Tribute to the Sounds of Forbidden Planet" on Friday

night. Part of the new music series known as "sound.," this concert of four presentations by young artists who work with electronics was presented on the lawn of Schindler House in West Hollywood.

History looked on. John Cage, who was part of the arts community that architect Rudolf M. Schindler invited to live in his home in the early 1930s, was the person who, two decades later, encouraged the Barrons to compose. And Bebe was on hand Friday for the tribute (Louis died in 1989).

But the strange thing about the works by David Rothbaum, Tom Grimley, Thomas Dimuzio and Sukho Lee was how distant their music felt from any sense of history. These composers, some of whom do collaborate at times or run their own studios, were clearly content Friday to forage individually in the world of electronic sounds. They are stealthy inventors, hunters and gatherers.

Their equipment is home-assembled or, if off the shelf, adapted for private purposes.

An audience doesn't so much listen to the often-intriguing sounds of these mechanic-musicians as listen in on them.

In their short program notes or in their hesitant comments that followed the concert, the composers noted that what they gained from "Forbidden Planet" was the knowledge that music still contains alien worlds to ex-

plore. All the same, little seemed outright new.

Dimuzio's roar of electronic ocean waves and gritty industrial drones proved planetary in a pleasantly engulfing sort of way. Grimley created witty installations in two rooms of Schindler House with homemade electronic boxes and suitcases full of circuitry, plus a self-strumming electric guitar that created a jungle of chirping, honking, mewling and snorfling.

At one point, the sound stopped unexpectedly, and the composer, dressed in milkman whites, announced that he had accidentally sat on the on-off switch.

Rothman's music was loud and might have served as background for the manufacturing business. Lee happily freaked out on a theremin for half an hour. The whirring glissandos of the electronic instrument invented circa 1920 had, by the time of "Forbidden Planet," become the cliché science-fiction film background that the Barrons set out to transcend. Lee gave the theremin an amusing, brief hint of new life, if a futuristically nostalgic one.

Ultimately, though, electronic trekking was more adventurous half a century ago. The Barrons trod new ground. Their young admirers now retrace their footsteps with the latest gear, trying to imagine what the landscape was like before the tourists arrived.