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Bugging Out on Insect Music

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

The sounds insects make are abstract and arcane, but they form a distinguished mode of music for David Rothenberg, a self-styled specialist and creative connoisseur of the bug-borne arts.

"There's a barrier between people and insects because they're so alien to us and people think they're kind of yucky," Mr. Rothenberg said. "But people actually love insect sounds. If you listen, you realize how beautiful and structured the insect chorus is."



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Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

David Rothenberg, author of 'Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise,' at his home in Cold Spring.

To commune with the subject of his new book, "Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise," Mr. Rothenberg, who teaches philosophy and music at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, made use of his polymathic pursuits as a writer (he's published other books on animal sounds and assorted natural phenomena) and as a working composer (he has numerous recordings of jazz and experimental music to his name).



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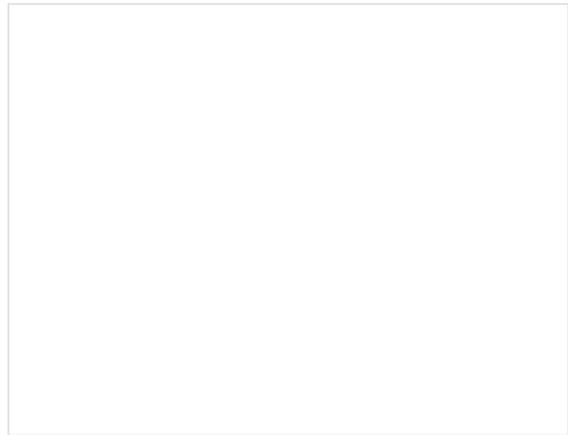
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David Rothenberg, author of 'Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise,' at his home in Cold Spring.

Based out of his home in Cold Spring, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley, Mr. Rothenberg, who is 50, wandered beyond the Catskills to consider what his notion of "bug music" could mean. He met with clinical researchers in the Midwest at a conference on "Invertebrate Sound and Vibration"; traveled to Sweden to listen to crickets; and spent time in Berlin contemplating insects' sonic connection to techno music. Among his findings was the idea

that bug sounds share more with human-designed music than is generally presumed.

He also joined the band, as it were. "Just writing a book about it doesn't do it justice,"



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Mr. Rothenberg said. "[Playing] music adds something else—getting people to listen and trying to interact with this natural phenomenon using different methods."



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Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
David Rothenberg, author of 'Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise,' at his home in Cold Spring.

To enlist in the jam, he went in search of cicadas singing at the peak of their powers. In Missouri, he found a brood so loud he had to trade out his clarinet for a bigger horn to hear himself within the din. "Trying to play saxophone covered in cicadas and having them climb inside your clothes—that was pretty crazy," he said.

Suspensions of craziness have followed him during his years-long mission to study insect sounds, which were difficult

to appreciate in aesthetic terms, at least in the beginning. But those sounds are very much musical in their structures and divinations, he hypothesized, and they commune with something primal in the human being.

"People don't think insect sounds are necessarily beautiful or musical," he said. "But in a way it's easy because people actually like noise. So much music is based on noise today, not just electronic music but electric-guitar fuzz. Why should music be fuzzy? Why do we like that?"

Mr. Rothenberg took a similarly multidisciplinary tack for past books on birds and whales, but he found more fellowship among insect researchers for his idiosyncratic approach. "Only at the banquet at a conference of insect scientists would they ask everyone to make the sound of their species all together, like a vast insect chorus," he said. "They realize there's something inherently ridiculous in studying these sounds. Bird scientists wouldn't do that—they're too serious."

Marlene Zuk, an evolutionary biologist who studies insects at the University of Minnesota, said Mr. Rothenberg's achievement is getting humans to recognize themselves in the habits of other species.

"What's great about 'Bug Music' is that it's a wonderful amalgam of what we appreciate about insects, which includes not just the scientific part but the aesthetic part, the human part, the part where we're connecting with another organism," she said. "It's hard to interpret what insects do in human terms. Some of what he's doing has overcome that."

Mr. Rothenberg regarded insect sounds as mostly a nuisance until he began to consider them for his book. But similarities soon became clear between bugs' aural expressions and everything from clanking African thumb-pianos to distorted guitars to repeating rhythms in dance music.

"I just went to a 14-year-old's birthday party and it was weird insect-noise dubstep music all night," he said. "They don't know how much it has to do with cicadas—nobody does."

He'll have occasion for more parties in the coming months, as the Northeast prepares for the arrival of special species of cicadas that emerge in the open air only in 17-year cycles. On May 22, for the Insect Music Festival, he will lead a series of lectures and musical performances based on the phenomenon at Judson Church in Greenwich Village, and he's working on a similar event for the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx on June 1.

Numerous other events will take place around the same time upstate, where the cicadas will be plentiful. "We're not sure there will be any in the city," he said. "There's a debate about whether there will be any in Central Park."

More typical cicadas, not to mention bugs of countless other kinds, remain to be



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heard by those with open minds and ears. "Paying attention to these sounds is good for people," Mr. Rothenberg said. "It makes the environment more connected, so you don't see it as an annoyance or an interruption. Just knowing a little bit about this makes it all a rich aesthetic experience."

A version of this article appeared April 17, 2013, on page A18 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Bugging Out on Insect Music.

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