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For the Theremin, Music Lessons Are Hands-Off

The New York Theremin Society Brings Arcane Instrument Into Spotlight

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Melanie Wong at the theremin workshop at Pioneer Works in Red Hook. *Ramsay de Giv* for *The Wall Street Journal*

Make subtle finger movements and refrain from flailing your arms.

That is the kind of instruction a group of aspiring musicians recently received at a workshop for the theremin, an eerie-sounding electronic instrument that is controlled, without being touched, by a performer's hands moving through the air.

"It's like tickling butterflies," said Charlie Hobbs, an instructor who also builds and sells custom theremins.

"It may seem esoteric," he added, "but I can guarantee that you have all dealt with the technology every day. What's going on is essentially what's happening in an AM radio."

The workshop, organized by the New York Theremin Society at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, was aimed at beginners and experts alike, ahead of a public concert on Saturday that will feature more than a dozen of the arcane instruments. Attendees of the workshop, which numbered around 20 on a weekend afternoon, will join others for a theremin symphony in the same industrial arts space in Red Hook.

"It's going to sound like nothing you've ever heard, for sure," said Rob Schwimmer, one of the NY Theremin Society's directors. "If uniqueness is something that appeals, you've got it made."

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Invented in the 1920s by a Russian physicist, the theremin is one of the earliest electronic musical instruments—and an odd one in that it is played entirely without contact. The performer stands in front of an electrified box while moving his or her hands in the vicinity of two metal rods, changing sounds by way of shifts to the invisible electromagnetic spectrum. The left hand controls the volume; the right hand controls the pitch.

Waltz for Clara Rockmore

Listen to Rob Schwimmer play the theremin, an eerie-sounding electronic instrument that is controlled, without being touched, by a performer's hands moving mysteriously through the air.

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"Picking notes out of the air is where things get iffy, if at all," said Mr. Schwimmer. "The hell is in the details."

His co-director in the society, Dorit Chrysler, took a more poetic tack in her description. "It's almost like meditating and getting to explore this tiny little micro-space of millimeters," she said. "A whole world opens up from there."

Mr. Schwimmer and Ms. Chrysler, both professional musicians with decades of theremin experience between them, manage the society, founded in 2005, to keep the tradition alive in an age of synthesizers and computerized sound. There are no official members, per se, but any and all enthusiasts count.

"There are members, but we haven't told them that they're members," Mr. Schwimmer said. "We don't have a secret handshake where you don't touch."

At last week's workshop, Mr. Schwimmer, 59, and Ms. Chrysler, 40, instructed players on 16 different theremins arranged around a sound-filled room.

"It's like '2001: A Space Odyssey,'" said Paul Bergel, performing in pantomime in a black leather jacket and a faded Beethoven T-shirt. Other points of comparison included hokey horror-movie soundtracks and attacks of scary slide whistles—even several hundred of them sliding all at once.

"The theremin is still fairly obscure, and one of the reasons is that it is notoriously hard to play," Ms. Chrysler told her students. "There is no real established way of how to approach it, but that can be a great opportunity and not a threat."

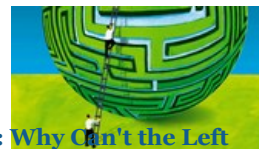


Participants practice at a theremin workshop in Red Hook, Brooklyn. *Ramsay de Giv* for *The Wall Street Journal*

As the afternoon progressed, the strange sounds grew more controlled. A run-through of a piece for multiple theremins enlisted all the instruments in slow, scintillating rises and falls. That piece, "Icelandic Volcano," by the composer Gordon Charlton, will be

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performed at the concert on Saturday by students from the workshop, along with other offerings from the more accomplished teachers of the class.

All signs during rehearsal pointed to success, according to Ms. Chrysler. "When they're all playing together, it sounds incredible," she said of the rare opportunity to hear an already rare instrument played in abundance. Other chances to hear the theremin in action include a performance and demonstration by Mr. Schwimmer and Ms. Chrysler at the Rough Trade record store in Brooklyn on Friday, and a classical music concert by the Metropolis Ensemble at (le) Poisson Rouge on April 27.

Students at the workshop seemed happy just to have a hands-on (or off) chance to play. Asked how she found her way there, Melanie Wong, a 16-year-old who trekked alone from Queens, said she first learned about the theremin online.

"I was on one of those obscure corners of the Internet and found the 'Legend of Zelda' theme song played by theremin. It was really cool," she said. Her love of sci-fi music makes her desire to continue playing strong, she added, but prospects are hard to come by. "I'm not sure how I'm going to pursue this," she said. "I'm not sure how many people teach this."

Mr. Hobbs said that worthwhile theremins can be found for around \$400. His own custom instruments, with hand-built mahogany cabinets and specs inspired by vintage originals from the 1920s, cost about \$1,200.

Lorenz Fish, a software developer who, at the age of 57, has been "goofing around" with his own theremin for 10 years, said he gets his fix most often by playing along to recorded music at home. He began with Bach sonatas for solo violin and acquired a liking for "Over the Rainbow" from "The Wizard of Oz."

It's easy to find suitable accompaniment, he said. "Any tune that flies along, that goes up and down—those are fun."

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