

Orchestra of robots gets its day

NEW YORK

Pat Metheny records new album at helm of dazzling one-man band

BY NATE CHINEN

Pat Metheny, the jazz guitarist, has lately spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about robots. Actually, that's putting it mildly. He has been downright obsessed with robots, and with getting them to do his bidding. "I haven't slept more than four hours a night for six months now," he said one day last fall at a makeshift rehearsal space in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, the former home of a Byzantine Catholic church.

Wearing a T-shirt and faded jeans, his tousled mane tucked under a baseball cap, Mr. Metheny stood before a wall measuring 14 feet, or 4 meters, in height and 35 feet, or 11 meters, in width that is festooned with musical instruments: an imposing, circuit-wired one-man band. The contraption itself seemed byzantine, all the more so when it sprang to life in a mechanical whirl: beaters tapping cymbals, levers gliding over strings, mallets cascading across a vibraphone.

Mr. Metheny closed his eyes and hunched over his guitar, bringing a human touch to "Expansion," the center-

piece of his new album, "Orchestron" (Nonesuch). With its shifting tonal center and fluttering groove, the name combined aspects of post-Coltrane jazz and Brazilian pop with cinematic breadth. So beyond the obvious technical feat—thousands of moving parts, requiring a programmed score—the performance dazzled on a basic level. Mr. Metheny and the unmanned orchestra were making his kind of music.

"This is something I've literally been dreaming about since I was 9," said Mr. Metheny, who, at 55, has three gold albums and 17 Grammy Awards to his name. Easily one of the most enterprising jazz musicians of his generation, he has worked in an array of settings, from folkish duos to boppish trios to the heartland sprawl of the Pat Metheny Group. But robots were a new wrinkle, and Mr. Metheny seemed eager to explain himself. He did so in the midst of preparations for a grueling tour, which kicked off Monday in France, and concludes with shows at Town Hall in Manhattan on May 21 and 22.

Mr. Metheny, who grew up in Lee's Summit, Missouri, traces his intrigue with musical automation to an antique player piano in the basement of his grandfather's house in Wisconsin. Later he learned about orchestrons, the pneumatically driven mechanical orchestras that flourished in the 19th century, before the advent of commercial recording. Though impressed by the Jules Verne-ish mechanisms, he was struck

by their musical limitations. "I thought, 'Why couldn't it be something else?'" he said. "Honestly it struck me as such an obvious thing to do. I'm kind of stunned nobody's really approached it."

Visible and amably intense, Mr. Metheny gives the impression of a restless intellect governed by quiet discipline. He first made his name as a teenage prodigy under the wing of the vibraphonist Gary Burton, who consulted on the orchestra's mallet selection. "I've learned never to underestimate Pat," Mr. Burton said. "He makes things work that most of us wouldn't dare to try."

The progressive current in Mr. Metheny's music runs deep. His albums, notably with the Pat Metheny Group, have pushed the envelope not only in terms of early-adopter synthesizer use (an interest shared with his founding partner in the band, the keyboardist Lyle Mays) but also with regard to harmony, texture and compositional form.

Along the way he became a gear-head touchstone. In the 2009 Mike Judge film "Extract," a pair of guitar store employees reverently drop his name in an inept flirtation with a customer. A different sort of geek might be drawn to "Orchestron," given its whiff of Victorian futurism, a hallmark of the steampunk aesthetic. "There's an awful lot of overlap between what Pat is doing and what we do as steampunks," C. Allegra Hawkmoor, an editor at Steampunk Magazine, said in an e-mail message. (Asked about

that subculture, Mr. Metheny seemed wary. "It's not really on my radar.")

Style, in any case, has rarely been the prime motivation for Mr. Metheny, who earnestly uses the word "research" to describe the music-making process. He said "Orchestron" was especially valuable because it led him to new methods, a new frame of possibilities. "The record is a viable portrait of what I'm hearing right now," he said, "and I wouldn't have gotten to that result any other way."

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His interest led him to Eric Singer, a Brooklyn engineer and musician doing similar work with a contrabass he called Lemur (League of Electronic Musical Urban Robots). Among Mr. Singer's breakthrough inventions was a guitar-bot, which resembles the junky droid in

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An actress keeps striding, chin forward, toward new direc-

NEW YORK

Claire Danes seeks roles that allow her to explore 'something else'

BY RICK LYMAN

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the movie "Short Circuit" but works remarkably well as a musical device.

Soon Lemur had been commissioned to build an orchestra. "Being Pat Metheny with his grand vision, he wanted one of everything," Mr. Singer said.

What complicated the assignment was Mr. Metheny's high standard for dynamics. Each instrument needed to be not only hair-trigger responsive to his signals but also capable of a range of volume. The robots receive their orders from Mr. Metheny's computer, on which he runs two different software programs — or, no less effectively, from his guitar or keyboard. (He said he planned to incorporate some robotic free improvisation on the tour, as a counterweight to his intricately plotted compositions.)

In the end Lemur created most but not all of the rig. Mr. Herbert provided at least one solenoid guitar, while Ken Caulkins, who has done animatronics work for Disneyland, made some pneumatic pieces, including an electric bass. A Chicago pipe organ company created two cabinets filled with jugs and bottles, to be played with blasts of air.

"Everything came in months late," Mr. Metheny said of the instruments, which began arriving last March, along with a daunting challenge. "There's some hardcore technical reasons why most mechanical music doesn't groove that hard," he said. "And I thought, 'Man, if it should be able to do anything, it should be able to do that.' So one of my first tasks was to go through, solenoid by solenoid,

life-long interest in musical automation to an antique player piano in the basement of his grandfather's house in Wisconsin.

and find out how each one felt the beat. And then figuring out software compensations for that latency. That took weeks."

Then there was the music, some of which he had composed ahead of time.

"None of it worked," he said. "It didn't feel good, it didn't sound good. It wasn't happening." So he went back to square one. "I very quickly had to find out what they were good at," he recalled, referring to the robots. "What can they do, what can't they do? And there's a whole bunch that they can't do. But I kind of wrote for their strengths."

Remarkably, "Orchestrion," recorded in October, shows few traces of herky-jerky compromise. "Entry Point," the first tune completed, is a study in subtle undulation. "Spirit of the Air," with its percussive pulsations, recalls both Steve Reich and vintage Pat Metheny Group albums like "Still Life (Talking)." The album's only truly awkward moment occurs in "Soul Search," during a flirtation with swing — not a robot strength, it turns out, even with cymbals on loan from Jack DeJohnette.

But then there's the shimmering, labyrinthine title track, an overture of palpable ambition: "A percussion ensemble could play it, and I hope one will someday," Mr. Metheny said. "But it would require the world's greatest virtuosos practicing for two months." (Of course the humans would then play it better, he clarified.)

He acknowledges but deflects the me- METHENY, PAGE 14

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Nearly two decades into an acting career that has had its ups and downs, its explosions of success, its tabloid phases and its fallow periods, Ms. Danes, at the ripe old age of 30, is perhaps a bit less earnest than she once was, but still noticeably serious — and noticeably energized by the coming premiere of the HBO film "Temple Grandin," in which she tackles one of her most demanding roles.

Wafer thin, Ms. Danes strides through the lobby of the SoHo Grand Hotel here like a creature in its proper habitat. Her green-gray eyes, full lips and strong chin — "I tend to want to lead with my chin when I talk," she says, and it's true — approach the world resolutely.

"You know, the thing about Claire Danes is: She takes her work super-serious," said the real Temple Grandin, no

slouch herself in the seriousness sweepstakes.

To those who know her books, her lectures or her work with animals, Ms. Grandin, 62, is a beloved figure, even a heroic one. She was one of the first autistics to write and talk about her condition to a mass audience, to begin clearing some of the murk that surrounded the subject for generations.

As a role, it is a full meal, especially since it focuses on Ms. Grandin's life in the '60s and '70s, before she became a famous author and animal sciences professor at Colorado State University. When she was a student and young adult, her autism was more pronounced, and she was frequently withdrawn, fearful and socially awkward, alternating between high skittishness and almost bombastic determination.

Once Ms. Grandin realized that the way she experienced the world ("My mind works in pictures") helped her to understand the way animals, particularly cattle, experience it, she became obsessed with finding ways to give them a calmer and gentler life on the march from ranch to slaughterhouse.

It's an odd subject for an inspirational film, an autistic woman who beat the odds to revolutionize the slaughterhouse industry.

With such a larger-than-life character, Ms. Danes and the director, Mick Jackson, had to be careful not to overdo it or inadvertently to fall into the conventions of disease-of-the-week movies. In part they relied on Ms. Danes's open and emotional approach to her roles.

Some actors seem to be hiding in the shadows as they perform, behind an emotional barrier that they only allow to slip now and then. It's a strategy that seduces audiences to lean in and pay closer attention. But Ms. Danes manages to be both emotionally transparent and intelligently complex. The New York Times film critic A. O. Scott may have been describing Ms. Danes when he said of her character in "Me and Orson Welles": "Sonja is both ingénue and woman of the world, at once a servant of the muse and a calculating careerist."

Mr. Jackson said: "Inside Temple's head things don't move smoothly from one thing to the other. Happy to panic to DANES, PAGE 14

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galomaniacal implications of the work. "A big part of my interest as a bandleader has been in trying to discover and illuminate my favorite potentials in each setting," he said in a follow-up e-mail message. "This is a setting with lots of potential, but not many reference points. In fact, basically none." In the same message, which exceeded 1,800 words, he compared "Orchestrion" to the Stevie Wonder album "Music of My Mind," in which Mr. Wonder played nearly every instrument himself. "This is exactly that — but live," he said.

Steve Rodby, the bassist in the Pat Metheny Group, and an associate producer of the album, made the same analogy. "To me this record is so much more about Pat than it is about the robots," he said. "It has this intrinsic liveliness — I almost said 'lifelike quality' — that comes from the fact that it's not sampled instruments. It's real sound in the air, and Pat's in there improvising."

In that sense the live "Orchestrion" experience is bound to overshadow the album, provided Mr. Metheny's road crew can sustain it.

During a second visit to the church, issues of transport for a solo tour with eight and a half tons of equipment were a pressing concern.

"I anticipate this tour as being a deeply character-building experience," Mr. Metheny said. (At any mention of potential malfunction he knocked on the wood floor.) Leif Krinkle, a Lemur robot builder, was inspecting equipment nearby, as was David Oakes, Mr. Metheny's technical director of many years, who will run the tour.

"Some of these things aren't done being built," Mr. Oakes said. He pointed to one input mechanism. "That's hardly road worthy: a 2-by-4 with wires taped to it. And it's not like I can call up and order a Fender Twin case for these. Every case has to be custom designed. I'm building them myself."

Mr. Metheny interrupted from across the room. "Leif's never heard this," he called, cueing up "Expansion," his showcase piece. And for the next eight or nine minutes the room once again filled with movement and sound, every bit as uncanny as before. Bringing the tune in for landing, Mr. Metheny looked up expectantly.

"It was nice to hear it as music," Mr. Krinkle said, "rather than seeing every little thing that needs to get work done." There was a meaningful pause.

"Looks like a big to-do list to me," Mr. Oakes said, not joining in the ensuing laugh.

"Me too," Mr. Metheny agreed. But he was beaming.

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"I asked her a lot of questions and she was incredibly open and available," Ms. Danes said. "Then at the end she gave me a hug. You know, for her, that's not easy. So that was very moving for me. That was the validation that I was looking for."

Several months later they were filming at a ranch in the Southwest, with a herd of cattle HBO bought for the film and a mock-up of a cattle disinfecting tank that Ms. Grandin had designed. Ms. Grandin was making her one and only visit to the set.

Ms. Danes said Ms. Grandin was very concerned that the tank be built correctly. And she wanted to double-check that they were using the right breeds of cattle.

"I thought, we can't have a silly thing like that 'City Slickers' movie, where they had Holstein cattle out there," Ms. Grandin said. "If you know anything about cattle, you'd know that was stupid."

Ms. Grandin said she tried to stay away from the actress, so as not to impinge on her mental working space. She

She was marked early on as an unusually talented and intelligent actress — the Ellen Page of the '90s.

watched the scenes from behind a nearby monitor.

"It was like going back in a weird time machine to the '60s," Ms. Grandin said. "She became me."

Ms. Danes most remembers what happened after the production broke for the day.

"She came up to me, and she was very concerned that I not experience post-partum depression," Ms. Danes said. "She told me, 'You must be very careful, because you are investing a lot of yourself in this, and there is going to be a fall, and you have to protect yourself from that.' She was pretty anxious that I know about that."

Ms. Danes thinks she's been able to take Ms. Grandin's advice, mostly by keeping her chin pointed forward, toward the next thing, the opposite of what came before. And she thinks she knows what it is.

"I've been acting for a long time now," Ms. Danes said. "When I was a kid, back when I was doing 'My So-Called Life,' I wasn't so sexualized, of course. That wasn't necessarily a vital part of what I was doing, but now it is, because I'm a woman."

She set down her cup of tea at a corner table in an otherwise unoccupied hotel restaurant late in the afternoon and leaned forward.

"But now I'm ready to be sexualized again," she said. "I can do it."

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