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Aural Sects: Avant musicians are creating sounds from the strangest sources.

Sticks and Stones

Rest on a futon and crank up the driftwood

By Sara Bir

"There's nothing to do!"

You remember saying this as a kid. Sure, there might be chores, homework, physical activity. And yet, there was *nothing to do*. "Mom, I'm bored!"

I've been stuck in the pop-music equivalent for months. Undiscovered great bands might be performing nightly, but it's not like I want to see any of them. It's cold and wet out there in the world, and I have to wake up early. But then the weekend rolls around, and Mr. Bir Toujour and I whine in desperate unison: "There's nothing to do!"

Which is how we ended up in a San

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Francisco loft sprawled out on a patchwork of futons and floor pillows shared with about a hundred other folks, waiting patiently to hear three musicians play with branches and ice. In the front of the room, gnarled and sun-bleached twists of driftwood dangle from a rack like a bloated rib cage, hovering over a menagerie of rocks, twigs and water vessels. From the look of it all, we are expecting the denizens of *Fraggle Rock* to traipse out and break into song at any moment.

Welcome to Field Effects, a series that claims to "showcase artists who are interested in framing the hidden beauty of the everyday world." Tonight's installment, Field Effects 22, is titled "Quiet Things"; the venerable nature-center display laid out before us is part of composer Cheryl E. Leonard's piece *Ziran*, a collection of works inspired by Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty. "Oh, Chinese poetry," mused a friend who'd once taught English in Beijing. "That stuff is *all* about nature."

Indeed. Before each piece, a reader recited a poem, first in Chinese, then in English. Then Leonard and fellow performers A. L. Dentel and Patty Liu, sitting Indian-style on the floor, extracted sound from found objects like shamans, blowing on feathers, rubbing stones together and rattling old bones around.

It's important to note that all of these items were amplified, resulting in sound quite unlike that produced by your average rubbing together of stones. Do you know what wind moving across a feather under these circumstances sounds like? Big. Big, fuzzy and somehow ominous—as opposed to the hollow tinkling of thin sticks dropped into a bowl, or the muffled drip of flower petals tossed into a basin of water. Ice, meanwhile, stirred in a ceramic bowl, is cold. Cold, chunky and grating.

The most riveting sounds resulted from

Leonard playing spindles of redwood and huge, spiky pinecones with a bow. I remember as a teenager seeing footage of Jimmy Page playing the electric guitar with a bow and thinking, "Whoa!" Well, let it be known here that Cheryl E. Leonard can kick some major ass on the pinecone, producing eerie birdcalls and whale songs from beyond. She puts Jimmy Page in his place.

During *Ziran*, no one stumbled to the bar to get a beer, no really annoying couple crowded right in front of me and proceeded to make out, and no scenesters skulked around the doorway to chain-smoke and talk shit. No one said much of anything, in fact, because we were all listening.

A sweaty, old-fashioned, fist-pumping rock show can bring a crowd to the brink of raw spiritual ecstasy, true. But sometimes it's refreshing to hobnob in other circles. I figured since I don't have any music to listen to, may be it's time to turn the stereo off for a while and think about the way the rest of the world can sound.

The Field Effects series may be coming to a close, but you can check updates on it here: www.fieldeffects.org. Cheryl E. Leonard's music can be heard at www.allwaysnorth.com.

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