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Redding songwriter creates unusual sounds with his voice

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Redding resident Derek Piotr performs experimental music.

Some songwriters create safe music they know will be popular with large audiences.

Then there is Redding resident Derek Piotr, who writes songs that are off the beaten path.

Piotr, 26, performs what is called experimental music, which he defines as “mostly about the search for truth but also about having an open attitude to new musical expressions and experiences,” he said.

Many times in his songs, his voice is unrecognizable as a human voice. He uses it more as a musical instrument and works with electronic as well as acoustic sounds.

“I try to find ways of combining styles that ideally mean something original and authentic, and hopefully that are surprising to listeners,” Piotr said. “It’s thrilling for me to play music that people have never heard before.”

Although Piotr plays piano and strings, his main instrument is his voice.

“I only use my own voice in my work. If there are strings, woodwinds or other instruments, I am scoring out the parts and giving them to professional performers,” he said.

Piotr’s next performance will be from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 25, at Molten Java, 213 Greenwood Avenue in Bethel. Admission is free.

Going on tour

Piotr recently returned from what he refers to as a noise tour, which he defined as a tour showcasing music that uses distortion or effects such as static, hiss and hum.

Over the past two months, as part of the tour, he has performed in various venues in cities and towns in New England, including Boston and Philadelphia as well as New Haven and West Haven.

“There were all experimental artists who were on the tour,” he said.

Piotr said he thinks his approach to noise music is different from other artists' approach.

"A lot of people use noise to be shocking or harsh or confrontational, but when I'm using it, I want to be more cathartic," he said.

New work

Piotr is currently at work on a remix compilation called Underlined, which is being released in March. It features remixes from such performers as Stephan Mathieu, AGF, Pinkcourtesyphone, and Steve Roden.

"It's my songs, reinterpreted by different artists that are on the same label," he said.

In the remix, Piotr said, he tries to combine delicate sounds with brutal ones.

"I like that contrast," he said. "It's a tension and release kind of thing."

Radio show

Recently, Piotr began running a weekly radio show called Beauty. It streams Wednesdays at 10 a.m. on radio.computer.

The focus of his show is "to get these hidden gems of my library out to the world," he said.

For the first half of the show, he plays whatever music has excited him from the current week. In the second half, he interviews guests and then has them play music of their choice.

"Sometimes it's people I know," he said. "Other times, it's reaching out to people I admire."

Guests have included Maja Ratkje, a Norwegian vocalist, and Phil Elverum, a member of Mount Erie, an indie band.

As part of the interview, he said, "I always ask them what they consider to be beautiful in their work and how they treat that. There is no definite answer to this question, which it makes it fun to chase every week."

"Doing a radio show has always been a dream of mine," he said.

Growing up with music

Since Piotr was very young, he has always been involved with music. He sang in John Read Middle School's choir and studied music theory and music appreciation at Joel Barlow High School.

He attended Columbia University in Manhattan for about six months. "But I was skipping class to go to the music library," he said, adding he later worked in the school's admissions department.

Aside from performing, Piotr works as a docent at Envoy Enterprises, an art gallery in Manhattan.

Internet generation

Piotr said he is a member of the first generation that has directly benefited from the Internet.

"I was exposed to different kinds of music through it," he said. "It was there where I first discovered experimental music."

Through the Internet, Piotr found his earliest role models — John Cage and Meredith Monk.

“I found their work really exciting,” Piotr said. “Something about their attitude toward composing and the freedom they allowed themselves really resonated with me.”

Piotr said he has learned over the years that there is no right way to make music.

“My ethos has always kind of been if you make music and plan to please people, it’s probably not going to fly. I try to make what’s exciting to me — I know others will find it exciting.”

Visit derekpiotr.com for more information and to listen to his music.