



Double What You Got for Mr. Roboto

Ajay Kapur mixes traditional Indian music and a 12-armed robot

Music Intelligence Sound and Technology 2007
8pm Thursday, November 29
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, UVic
Free • 704-2531

There are those who feel that technology and traditional forms of music—or any art—should not mix. Clearly, Ajay Kapur is not one of those people. The recent UVic grad has taken his love of technology and traditional East Indian music and combined them by way of a 12-armed robot named MahaDeviBot who plays Indian percussion. Seriously.

“The goal was, how do you make a human perform with a machine, and even more so, a robot?” says Kapur, whose degree is in artificial intelligence and music. “I did a lot of work; I’ve been working on this project for many years.”

This Thursday, people will have the chance to see the robot drummer interact with other musicians at a free concert. Kapur says there are three ways the robot does this. The first has the robot and human interacting with a microphone, where

the robot has learned what the different audio sounds mean. The second involves putting sensors on the humans’ instruments so the robot can detect the pitch and rhythm of what the musician is playing. Third, sensors can be put on the human’s body.

“I wear this thing on my head and move my head around and the computer gets the data from that and uses that to make decisions,” Kapur says with a chuckle. “So you’re giving it all these different senses—sight, touch and sound.”

Kapur’s band, Karmetik Underground, will be performing on Thursday (“I used to play drums, but now I play sitar—the robot replaced me,” he laughs), as well as music composers from SFU and UVic, which will give Kapur a chance to sit back and see his creation in action.

“We’re going to get a lot of peoples’ interpreta-

tion of what to do with this machine and everybody’s doing something completely different,” he says. “This is really exciting for me.”

He’s not the only one excited; the Knowledge Network will be filming at the show for an upcoming program on music technology. But before Kapur has a chance to sit back and enjoy the fame of being a TV star, he’ll be hitting the road for a tour—robotic drummer in tow—in February, stopping in New Delhi and Singapore. But not everyone is as excited as he is about merging new technologies with old traditions and Kapur’s not expecting the same reaction overseas that he’s been getting here.

“I’m expecting to get my ass kicked,” he laughs. “But I don’t even know if we’ll make it through the airport. We’ll see how it goes.”

—Greg Pratt