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## Fascinating music from a black box

By **ROBERT FINN**  
MUSIC CRITIC

Dennis James waved his hands in the air like an electronic astrologer at the Cleveland Museum of Art Tuesday night — and out of the black box at his side came something close to real music.

James was performing on a reconstructed theremin, a 1920s-vintage electronic instrument that had a brief vogue among symphonic composers but has been used since only in a few movie scores and by a few pop music groups. James and two other musicians were providing the music for "Aelita," a wildly campy 1924 Russian science-fiction movie that was shown as part of the museum's film program.

A goodly crowd showed up, about equally divided between sci-fi film buffs and the musically curious. After the show, scores of them came onstage and tried their hand at coaxing sound out of the shiny black box.

One thing seemed obvious: It does help to be a musician. James, a trained organist and pianist and a serious student of the theremin, was able to produce an eerie, vibrato-laden but indisputably musical sound from the instrument. Most of the lay folk who took his place produced only angry-sounding loud buzzing noises.

So what what does the theremin sound like? Often during "Aelita" one was reminded of George Bernard Shaw's description of the sound of a cello: Like a bee buzzing inside a stone jug.

What you need to make it sound musical, James told the fascinated audience, is a wrist motion like a "controlled palsy."

The instrument is temperamental, he warned. You have to guess where to put your hand (which is in midair, not touching anything) to produce a given pitch, and that location can change in midperformance for all sorts of highly technical reasons.

About half of "Aelita" takes place on Mars, and James used the theremin to contribute to the otherworldly atmosphere. When the story was back on Earth, he played piano. His colleagues, baritone horn player Miles Anderson and violinist Erica Sharp, also doubled as electronic sound-effects wizards.

The musical score was cooked up by James from specimens of stock music used in Soviet silent films, one fragment of the actual "Aelita" score, and his imagination.

The theremin's major drawback, based on this performance, is that you cannot vary its timbre. The player determines pitch and controls volume, but the basic sound has a sameness to it. James had

added some electronic refinements that did occasionally make it suggest a human voice or a wavering, wailing siren.

The music for the earthly scenes in "Aelita" was fascinating, too. It was a mix of deliberately vapid palm-court salon music with suggestions of Hungarian dances or Gypsy tunes. James has done a skillful job so that the music closely follows the visual images — chase music when required, romantic tunes, walking music, railroad music, etc.

The film cannot be easily pigeonholed. "Aelita" contains elements of Three Stooges-style low comedy, political allegory, pure fantasy and soap opera. It is hugely amusing to a 1990 audience, though perhaps not totally intended that way (there was a fair amount of snickering at subtitles like "press your lips to mine, like they do on Earth").

The big question is: Was this film meant to be taken seriously? Opera buffs in the audience could not escape the many parallels to Mozart's "Magic Flute": Boy undertakes journey to meet girl, there is a subsidiary Papageno-Papagena pair of lovers, a dour Sarastro-like Martian ruler and a chorus of priestly like ruling "elders" who stand around looking solemn. But there is no parallel in Mozart for the revolt that establishes "The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of Mars."