From Pocket to Stage, Music in the Key of iPhone

By CLAIRE CAIN MILLER and MIGUEL HELFT

PALO ALTO, Calif. — An ex-pec tant buzz fell over the audi ence as the director of the cham ber ensemble, Ge Wang, came out and asked them to turn off their cellphones. The seven other musicians, dressed in black, filed in and took their positions in a circle.

The conductor raised his hands. A low droning sound arose, as if the chamber ensem ble were tuning. Then the mu si cians began to swing their arms in wide circles, creating rising and falling waves of electronic sound.

The Stanford Mobile Phone Or chestra’s performance on Thurs day used the most unusual of instru ments: Apple iPhones ampli fied by speakers attached to small fingerless gloves.

Sometimes the sounds were otherworldly. Sometimes, they mimicked rain drops, bird songs or freeway traffic. In one piece, two performers blew into their phones to stir virtual wind chimes. In another, the instru ments took on personalities based on the pitch, volume and frequency of the notes played — and if the musicians were flitting, teasing and admiring each other.

And gradually, the audience, dis obeyed instructions, pulling out their own iPhones and iPods to record the performance.

From the earliest days of the iPhone, applications that mimic sound have drawn the attention of musicians. But until now, it has been difficult to work with a sufficient number of devices to make technology an integral part of a concert.

Ge Wang, a co-director of the Stanford Mobile Phone Orchestra, moved around the audience on Thursday, playing two iPhones.

Ge Wang says the iPhone may be the first musical instrument, electronic or otherwise, that musicians will carry in their pockets.

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