

Now the Web is singing

Flabberghasted? You soon will be, if high-quality audio becomes a feature of CD-Roms and the Internet, says **Sophia Chauchard-Stuart**

After the excitement of moving images on the Web and in CD-Roms, the next hurdle is how to make the media really sing. Quality audio is a passion with designed and audio-friendly Flabberghasted, a multimedia content creation company with corporate clients that include EMI (Premier), Virgin, Sony, Warner Interactive, Dorling Kindersley and Microsoft.

Flabberghasted was set up by two years ago by Alex Boyesen, who came from the sound engineering side of the music industry, and is based in the old Spitalfields Market, London. The Spitz, as the market is known, has been redeveloped, with lots of small, arty companies and groovy cafés playing jazz late into the night.

What is unique about Flabberghasted is that they approach content creation with a design-led sensibility. Rather than installing every plug-in available and seeing what happens, the crucial elements of sound and picture quality are carefully taken into account.

Boyesen started off building sound content for Dorling Kindersley's interactive CD-Roms for children and Microsoft's Encarta series. On the back of the Microsoft contract, Boyesen built a sound studio near the present Flabberghasted office and gradually built up a roster of clients. Flabberghasted is now known as a technically advanced production company; building complex sites with VRML, licensing development code and working with Apple, EMI and Microsoft over the new Blue Book standard for Enhanced CD.

The music industry is now looking to Enhanced CD. This can be played in a standard audio CD player but has extra data inlaid which is accessed via a PC. This data delivers VRML nodes, video segments, text and interactive possibilities for fans to "talk" to artists. To date, Flabberghasted has created Enhanced CDs for artists such as Tori Amos and for re-releases of works by John Coltrane.

After pushing back the frontiers of CD-Roms, Boyesen was initially wary of

the Web. "I thought it sounded like CB radio," he laughs. "I didn't get Flabberghasted involved until fairly recently, when I felt it could be challenging and more creatively satisfying."

The most recent Web project for Flabberghasted was a programme on Philip Glass for the music series Riff on MSN. Utilising MSN's proprietary architecture, Flabberghasted has managed to achieve stunning sound quality over the Internet. "The difference here," Boyesen explains, "is that the sound is contained and accessed from within the Blue Ribbon software which Microsoft incorporated into its architecture for MSN."

"We also wrote the sound files using Philip Glass's music and made it self-generating within the parameters we created. Each time you logged on you would get different music, and even Philip Glass said the graphics were very sexy."

Within MSN, developers are provided with a framed set-up (for the background) which is fixed, and develop their program within the



Crystal clear: a page from the Philip

Glass project created by Flabberghasted for the Microsoft Network

body frame. The Philip Glass project consisted of an initial page using VB scripting, MSN's own software and gif animation (which, incredibly, took up only 250K). Clicking on the animation made it move into different scenes, while the self-rendering music changed and blended accordingly.

The graphics are sexy, providing fine interactivity, great quality sound and a delicious, dream-like land-

scape of plump cherubs and Venetian scenes. Other elements of the program included an interview with Philip Glass via Real Audio and a lounge area where the user could rework the artist's *oeuvre*.

This was the most exciting use of sound on the Web. Users on Riff could choose different moods, music styles, instruments and voice to make up their own interpretation of the piece, with excellent

sound rendition. With Philip Glass and the BB King show (now on Riff), Flabberghasted has proved what can be done on the Web with innovative design and quality audio. As new technology and compression techniques are developed, companies such as Flabberghasted are making the Web really sing ■