Electronic Sounds

THE MODERN AGE IN MUSIC IS ALIVE AND WELL—RIGHT HERE

By Peter Kobel

Santa Fe has long had a reputation as a center for the performance of music. But the music that comes to mind tends to be classical : the opera, the chamber music, the Orchestra of Santa Fe. However, although the fact isn't as well-publicized, Santa Fe is also a haven for the musically avant-garde.

Though there are no splashy, $25 famous-artist posters to advertise them, a number of these modern composers and performers are working away on the sidelines, experimenting with the electronic medium.

Tucked away in a garage filled to the ceiling with electronic equipment, a couple of video artists are putting together electronic works that pulse through a TV screen. Another pair of musicians is adapting Ravel's "Mother Goose" to a keyboard synthesizer. Still another avant-garde musical activist is bringing experimental performances to Santa Fe as well as working on her own compositions, which use not only vocal and instrumental sounds, but innovative contributions from the insides of a piano and a water faucet.

While these artists may seem less conspicuous than the opera singers or violinists, they are nevertheless putting Santa Fe on another kind of musical map.

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These composers and performers are part of a musical period that didn't begin until shortly after World War II, with the commercial availability of tape recorders.

Historically, however, the search for ways to produce sounds electronically goes back to the 19th century. The invention of the phonograph in 1877 by Thomas Edison and Emile Berliner (who worked independently) was very important; it proved that in theory, at least, all acoustic sounds could be successfully recorded and preserved.

There were some remarkable failures, as well. Thaddeus Cahill of Massachusetts created a fantastic and complex mechanism that he called the telharmonium. He worked for 11 years at turning electrical signals into sound, using rotary generators and telephone receivers. Cahill introduced his machine to the public in 1906. It weighed 200 tons.

The telharmonium failed in large part because Cahill couldn't get sufficient volume; amplifiers and loudspeakers hadn't been invented yet. Nevertheless, Cahill's ideas were basically sound; he was simply a couple generations ahead of his time.

Another important forerunner of electronic music was the Italian futurist painter, composer and inventor, Luigi Russolo. In 1913 Russolo called for the destruction of all the music of the past, to be replaced by a new kind of music more accurately reflecting the new industrial state.

He produced a number of mechanical devices, called "intonarumori" ("noise intoners"), such as his "scoppiatore" ("exploder"). In 1913 and 1914 he gave "noise concerts" in Genoa, London and Milan, where they caused a riot. Ironically, all of his machines were destroyed in Paris by the industrially-produced forces of World War II.

Other electronic instruments of importance invented before World War II were the theremin, the Ondes Martinot and the trautonium.

Currently, the electronic composer uses any of three categories of instruments: tape recorders; sound synthesizers, dating from the early 1950s; and computers, first used in music in the late '50s.

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Bill Martin and Kent Reynolds formed the Canyon Foundation in Santa Fe in 1978. With the aid of NEA and private grants, they have collected an impressive electronic studio, which includes two state-of-the-art Prophet-10 synthesizers.

By far the most commercial of the artists under discussion, they are working primarily in a traditional-classical mode, using keyboard synthesizers. Martin and Reynolds have orchestrated classical works to great effect, such as Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," Ravel's "Mother Goose," and Debussy's "Reverie."

They also write their own compositions, often in a soft, impressionistic manner, as in their piece, "Dreams," performed at a benefit around Christmastime last year at Hill's Gallery.

Martin and Reynolds also participated in the Community Outreach program with the Orchestra of Santa Fe, traveling around the state giving performances for 18 months, and they played in the OSF's Bach marathon for three years.

Last summer they provided special effects for the Santa Fe Opera production, "A Schoenberg Evening." They also recorded opera singer Janet Northway's voice, and she sang a duet with the recording. Time Magazine praised the "eerily ecstatic duet" and a "gloriously jangling doorbell," which martin and Reynolds produced electronically, using virtually every piece of equipment they had.

The Canyon Foundation has also worked with individual composers such as Joe Weber, who is composing an opera based on the Mayan creation legend; local composer Michael Moore; and Taos composer Tom Ehrlich, whose double LP, "Stars," was released recently.

The 38-year-old Martin describes electronic music as "a natural extension of our musical consciousness. There are new vistas of technology in the arts that no one even imagined 20 years ago."

Both Martin and Reynolds say that their favorite contemporary electronic performer is Isao Tomita. They caution that the field of electronic music is still young, and that a composer of Bach's power hasn't yet appeared in their field.

Martin and Reynolds compose their pieces separately or together, but work on the orchestration collaboratively. Martin readily admits, however, that Reynolds is the more informed technician.

"We can't really separate it. It's the synergistic process of our minds that really makes our music possible." Martin said. As much as possible, he says, they like to perform live.

The Canyon Foundation's current project is a full-length ballet, "Tu'wanasavi," commissioned by Ballet West. "Tu'wanasavi," from the Hopi word for "center of the universe," will premiere in September 1982 at the Santa Fe Opera.

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Marcia Mikulak is a woman of wide-ranging interests and talents. The 32-year-old is an accomplished pianist, an arts administrator and a composer.

Mikulak has two albums to her credit, one devoted to the piano music of Dane Rudhyar, and another, to be released soon, called "Gardner Jencks, Selected Works for Piano, 1942-1980." Jencks is a Tesuque composer. Mikulak's first album, the product of a long collaboration with Rudhyar, was widely praised by critics.

For three years, Mikulak has produced the "Explorations in Music" series, with the aid of grants from the New Mexico Arts Division. Among others, she has brought electronic composers Robert Ashley and Pauline Oliveros and performance artist Jom Pomeroy to Santa Fe. This year she presented two tape concerts, moderated by Susan Ohori, a KUNM announcer. They included works by Charles Amirkhanian, Conlon Nancarrow and James Tenney.

Mikulak also composes works specifically for tape, using only acoustic sounds. The technique is reminiscent of "musique concrete," one of the earliest styles of modern electronic music, which evolved in Paris in the late '40s. The practitioners of "musique concrete" insisted on using only "natural" sounds and noises created by man, his artifacts and his environment.

Mikulak's 15-minute composition, "Pipe Dreams," uses vocal, instrumental and natural sounds such as breathing, spoken text, gongs, an unnamed, homemade drum-string instrument, water faucets and the insides of a piano, which are plucked, scratched or hit with a mallet.

The effect is often haunting and mysterious, particularly when she uses her unusual piano technique. Some humor is injected into the piece by the text, a testimony for the Mark Eden breast development program, read in two voices which overlap. One voice is confident and self-assured, the other desperately insecure.

Mikulak will present "Pipe Dreams" with

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Photo by Cynthia Kobel

The Vasoulkas: New sounds on the Old Santa Fe Trail

Electronic Music

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slides and movement June 13 at St. John's College. She will also be performing piano works by Gardner Jencks, Shulamit Run and Ann Kish.

Mikulak also composed a score for Bruce King's Vietnam play, "Dustoff," performed last fall. Her is an eerie piece of music, using voices and rustling leaves that sound like rain, and evocative of the heart of darkness the play portrays.

"I don't know where my ideas come from," Mikulak says. "I'm just curious about exploring possibilities. I don't think my work has fulfilled my potential."

Mikulak describes her work as tentative, a process rather than an artifact. "If we can get into a way of watching a process, that's important. Not wanting a certain effect, because that's all you get, is the efffect.

"When I work," she continues, "I will not know what I'm looking for. I will enter into the medium of sound. The piece constructs itself on that premise.

"Rather than work with the known, I prefer to work with the unknown. Rather than work with the visible, I want to work with the invisible."

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Woody and Steina Vasulka are better known as video artists than as musicians. However, Steina is a classically trained violinist, having played with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and in New York. Together, they founded the Kitchen, an electronic media theater, in New York City in 1971.

Woody is the musical composer of the two. "It's all his," Steina says. "I was so trained in traditional music, I'm not free."

Woody admits that he doesn't have much background in music. He has a degree in industrial engineering, and also studied film at the Academy of the Performing Arts in Prague in the early '60s—the center of the Czech New Wave in films. He played the trumpet in a jazz band as a teenager and was jazz critic for "Rovnost," a daily newspaper in Brno, Czechoslovakia, his home town.

"Everyone in the leftist avant-garde at that time (the mid-'50s) was fascinated by negro art," he says. They loved jazz music. This goes way back to when Picasso discovered African art." When I have visited the Vasulkas, I've usually found them listening to reggae music.

The music that Woody makes is done on a synthesizer without keyboards; rather than keyboards there are only dials for signal generators, modulators, filters, etc. The music reflects his background in engineering; it is definitely machine music. He likes to play it loud, and it is full of the sound of giant generators, dynamos in a huge dam, releasing a flood of sound.

He says he doesn't like keyboard synthesizers: "Keyboards impose themselves on the structural understanding of sounds, even on the rhythm. There are certain human limitations in using keyboards, as well."

He uses two drifting oscillators (the sound-generating part of a synthesizer), and explains, "The two frequencies combine or beat against each other and result in an artifact—a heterodyne.

"Everything is done in real time. In real time, you have to let it go, you don't have that much control."

His music is very varied. "The West," inspired by an early trip out here from New York, is more like "traditional program music," he comments. The piece conveys the vastness, the hugeness of the West.

Vasulka has also done a number of compositions that he describes as being "like marches." They are very reminiscent of Emerson, Lake and Palmer in concert, a sort of protracted, full-fledged air raid.

And, some of his work is more like songs. One piece, with its long mournful cries, sounds very much like Morton Subotnick's "The Wild Bull."

The music can be very abrasive, as in "Calligrams," a score for a video by Steina. Parts of it are frictional to an extreme, like the

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Nieto: A painting in progress...

ARTISTS' STUDIOS

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John Nieto

A far cry—and distance—from Price's plein-aire palace is the workspace of Mescalero Apache artist John Nieto. Nieto's studio-home hangs on top of the mountains southeast of town, with a view that stretches the imagination. His studio is in the remodeled garage.

A stereo complex (modest in size) sits opposite his easel; when he's working, music is Nieto's constant companion. Numerous paint cans sit around the room, and Nieto's number 10 and 12 brushes lie poised at the feet of his most recent enterprise.

Indoor/outdoor carpeting covers the cement slab of garage floor. A desk and "high tech" items furnish the modular office.

An Indian skull (Nieto traded art work to an anthropologist for it) sits to the left of the desk and a first-place blue ribbon from a 1979 Dallas art show hangs to the right.

Above the desk is a German impressionist painting extracted from an art magazine. "I like the way the paint is pushed around," Nieto comments, taking the picture from the wall for another look.

Nieto's studio is not luxurious, but then again it is temporary. He points to a segment of land beyond the sound-proof garage, that is to be his new studio site. One has the feeling that the new studio could be spectacular, but Nieto says, "It won't be too pretty. I don't want it to be too distracting."

Nieto's studio is efficient and very clean, it has an air, a feeling, of his success.

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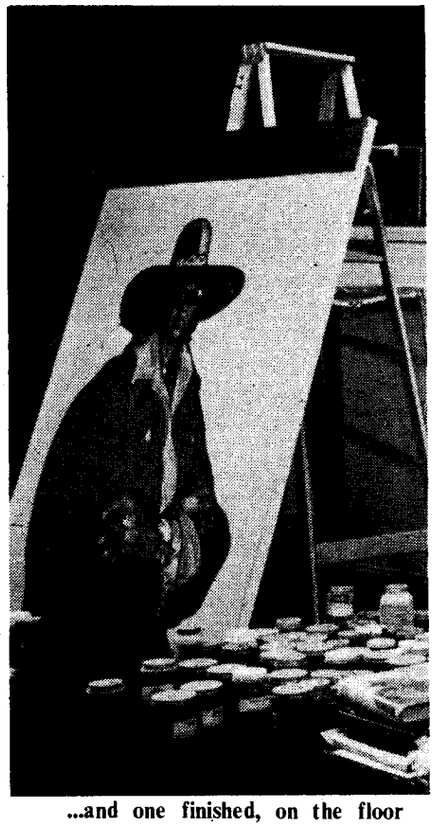

...and one finished, on the floor