

Sliding & whooshing around

Most of the electronic music we hear is produced on the many brands of no-fuss-no-muss music synthesizers. They are available now for as little as \$1000 or \$1500, so composers everywhere have access to them and, in many cases, own their own units. With such wide availability, one might expect the synthesizers to be the lingua franca of new music, but instead, they seem to me to have become the bane of new music. It's getting hard to tell one synthesizer composer from another, because they all tend to make use of the same convenient automatic devices supplied by the manufacturers.

I'm not suggesting that the synthesizers are bad. They are excellent for teaching purposes, and they often work extremely well in combination with voices or instruments, particularly when the synthesizer itself is played live, rather than recorded on tape. What I am suggesting is that, as far as pure electronic music is concerned, much of the most interesting and original work is coming not from the fancy synthesizers but from homemade gadgets designed by specific composers for specific purposes.

David Behrman is one of the best examples of these do-it-yourself electronic music composers. A while back he did a piece called "Runthrough," which is actually just a complicated set of cheap circuitry. Several participants are allowed to improvise by activating photo cells with flashlights and manipulating a few switches. It must be great fun to play this musical game and, judging from the Mainstream recording of the piece, the raucous music which results is remarkably interesting just to listen to at the same time.

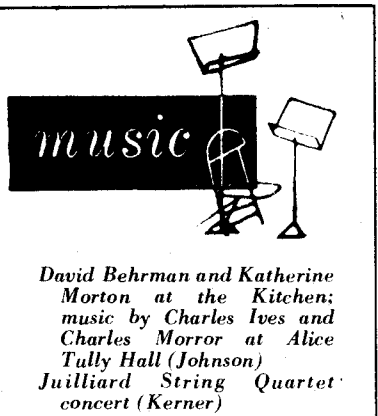
Now Behrman has designed a more sophisticated set of electronic equipment and written a score to go with it. The equipment is rather limited in many ways, but it is much better suited to his current concerns than any ready-made synthesizer would be.

Behrman and Katherine Morton played "Homemade Synthesizer Music with Sliding Pitches" for about an hour at the Kitchen on January 23. It begins as a collage of sliding sounds, mostly in the upper register. The tones come in like little sirens, starting very softly, getting louder as they slide up a few notes, and then fading out on a lower pitch. A few soft, sustained pitches in the background serve to orient the ear, creating a minor key feeling. Later, the sliding effects become less prominent, and stable pitches take over, fading in and out in various ways.

Unlike most electronic music, there is a great concern for harmony. The tones often overlap into fairly thick chords, and every note is precisely in tune. The basic sounds are all triangle or sawtooth waves, so the tone color is relatively consistent, and the music has a pleasant quality as it drifts from sound to sound, always maintaining a moderate volume level.

The concert was also interesting to watch, as the audience sat in close proximity to the performers. It was an intimate atmosphere, almost like watching them in their studio, and one could try to puzzle out which dial was controlling what.

THE CONCERT of music by Charles Ives and Charles Morrow at Alice Tully Hall on January 25 was a model of effective programming. Every piece in the program related in some way to another piece on the program, and the concert as a whole said a lot about Americana, about Ives, and about how a composer who



David Behrman and Katherine Morton at the Kitchen; music by Charles Ives and Charles Morrow at Alice Tully Hall (Johnson) Juilliard String Quartet concert (Kerner)

The tone of the evening was effectively established by asking the audience to stand and sing three verses of "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty..." This set things up not only for Morrow's witty band arrangement of the variations on this tune, which Ives had originally written for organ, but also for Ives's wonderful "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," and for all the other Americana on the program.

From this description, it may sound like the evening was more of a political rally than a concert, but nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, the program posed many political questions and forced the listener to examine his own feelings toward patriotism, especially since it happened to fall on the day of former President Johnson's funeral, right in the midst of Vietnam ceasefire negotiations. But the political tone was always under the surface. There was not a single outright statement which would have been offensive to either conservatives or liberals.

Morrow's new Trumpet Concerto is perhaps the finest piece he has written. It begins with odd whooshes of air from the solo

Continued on next page

appreciated Ives has chosen to deal with some of the same material 50 years later.

The Packer sisters, who did a perky baton-twirling routine to Ives's "Intercollegiate March" for military band, returned, dressed in black, to do a slow solemn routine to Morrow's Trumpet Concerto ("The Military"). The bugle calls in the Trumpet Concerto related back to the bugle calls in Ives's "From the Steeples and the Mountain" for brass and bells. The Ives Three-Page Sonata drew a curious parallel with a longer piano piece by Morrow, also in three sections, called "Requiem for the Victims of Kent State."

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music

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trumpet, which are soon accompanied by dissonant murmurings from the orchestra. The murmurings build gradually, and the soloist eventually works into his high register. The piece reaches a climax, in a way, but it is not the kind of climax that allows everything to unwind. Instead, things seem to wind tighter and tighter. It is remarkable how much intensity the piece generates without ever being loud or bombastic. This intensity is due mostly to the careful way in which Morrow has paced the progress of the music. But it also has something to do with the strong symbolism associated with "Taps" and other bugle calls, and with the fact that the music always gravitates around one pitch.

The able soloists were Zita Carno, piano, and Gerard Schwartz, trumpet. The excellent conductor was Henry Schuman. And the "New York Imperial Pickup Night Guard Military Band" turned in some of the best concert band playing I have heard in a long while.

—Tom Johnson

ELLIOTT CARTER'S Third String Quartet, which had its world premiere January 21 on a Juilliard String Quartet program in Tully Hall, is at this point in time some kind of ultimate in power, tension, and energy—conventional string-playing techniques put to the use of an unconventional and far-seeing intellect. I emphasize the conventionality of technique because younger composers, some gifted, some not, have been exploring many areas of performance practice with strings, brass, and so forth, and this is no time for musical retrenchment. But the new Carter Quartet proves that the old ways are far from exhausted if musical ideas are strong enough.

This new piece, commissioned by the Juilliard School for its resident string quartet, is actually two simultaneous duos—violin with cello and the other violin with viola—concentrating and perhaps making more accessible the idea of simultaneity that operates four-fold in Carter's recent Concerto for Orchestra. Here the violin-cello pair are given four movements (Furioso, Leggerissimo, Andante espressivo, Giocoso) that occur first in order and recur out of order for a total of three times each. These 12 sections are laid upon 12 sections given to the other pair of instruments, which plays six movements twice each, with the initial

order similarly disrupted. There are short stretches of tacet bars for each duo, and the various movement changes occur at such distances that each movement of one duo will eventually coincide with some part of each movement of the other pair of players. This sets up many conflicts and/or complements in speed, volume, and emotional approach so that the entire quartet's expressive power reaches dimensions unheard of in most contemporary music that is new in its soul and bones as well as in its chronology.

Trying the music out at my own snail's pace on the piano, I was startled to find out how much of it is laid out in sevenths and ninths, which give it in this slowed-down and sometimes split-duo state, a juicy romantic quality. But

taken at Carter's speeds and in the juxtaposition of the two duos, the music becomes as clashing and recklessly swift as one could imagine. Certainly, the Juilliard String Quartet (violinists Robert Mann and Earl Carlyss, violist Samuel Rhodes, and cellist Claus Adam) played the premiere not only as nearly perfect as eye and ear could detect, but with a fury (along with a sweetness in the tremulous, soft pages near the end) that left their hands trembling, as well as a stand-up-cheering audience's ears and minds.

—Leighton Kerner

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