

The New Music

RICHMOND, VA.

There was Richmond—peaceful, happy, curious. And then one day not long ago the Sonic Arts Group paid a visit. Its object was a "concert" of "music." Richmond, some of it unaware, purchased tickets. The composers involved—young men named Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma—seemed pleasant and intelligent enough. And so the concert began.

Then, for some concertgoers, the truth was almost a shock. They discovered that to these young men, "music" is composed of sounds generated by electronic equipment and modulated onstage by the human hand, in accordance with directions set by a complex "score" (together, for Mr. Ashley, with a variety of theatrical activity). Mr. Ashley's piece, entitled *Frogs*, creates a sound "environment" based on prerecorded frog voices, the guiding symbol of a piece that is in fact heavy with thematic meaning. A tape of a man talking about frog sounds is played over the frogs and progressively "degenerated" into a sound not unlike that of the frogs themselves. Throughout, Mr. Ashley sits at a table explaining the piece, with startling frankness, as it unfolds in front of him. On the stage, other performers, some counting into a microphone, others pacing about, create a parable in motion of Mr. Ashley's lecture.

Mr. Behrman's *Runthrough* concerns itself with sounds produced within an ordinary tone generator and altered by modulators played by two "performers." The result is an incredibly complex aural experience far from displeasing.

In Mr. Lucier's infamous *Music for Solo Performer*, he amplifies his own brain waves, modulating them, again, with precision instruments arranged before him at a table on stage. A concurrent prerecorded tape alternates sound with the steady thump-thump of the waves. A third sound pattern results from the loudspeaker jostling a set of percussion instruments.

Mr. Mumma's *Mesa: Five Source Duo*, finally, literally alters sound with sound. Four performers sit at tables brandishing harmonicas wired to modulators, which in turn are wired to two prerecorded tapes. The harmonicas, when blown, produce voltage that can effect any one of three activities: Amplify an already-playing tape, start a second tape, or produce an independent electric sound of its own.

In each of these pieces, save for *Frogs*, the sound has an element of indeterminacy. Though the scores are remarkably precise in their directions to the performers, resembling nothing so much as circuitry diagrams, the sound that results still varies from night to night, depending on the interaction between and among performers and machines.

The Sounds, in Startling Variety, Break With Patterns of the Past

In this respect, as in others, the Sonic Arts Group is a fairly representative example of what one might collectively term the New Music. Not that the phenomenon is easily pigeonholed. Proceeding from composer John Cage's dictum that "everything we do is music" [The National Observer, June 26, 1967], the composers of the '60s have produced a startling variety of musical "forms." By 1958, in fact, the scores had become a kind of art form all their own, and several galleries have since presented shows devoted entirely to displaying them. Composers like Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Mr. Mumma, and Mr. Ashley turned as well to intricate, expressive designs using mathematics and line drawings.

"First came the realization," recalls Mr. Cage, "made inescapably clear by magnetic tape, where so many inches equal so many seconds, that space could be made to equal time. Thus symbols could be placed on a page, that is, a canvas of time, where they were to be performed. This freed notation from the time values of quarter-notes, half-notes, and so on."

Whatever the destiny of the "minimal score," its function here is to illustrate how deeply infused the New Music is on every level with the event-as-music and with a willingness to reduce the ideas of Mr. Cage and his colleagues to their flat, logical end. It is here, on the "event" level, that the New Music emerges into forms barely distinguishable from the "Happenings" of Allan Kaprow, the "Ray Gun Theater" of Claes Oldenburg, the "Theater Pieces" of Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, and the "dances" performed by the loose association known as the Judson Dance Theater.

In the Once Group of Ann Arbor, Mich., in fact, the New Music boasts an ensemble very nearly the equal of the Judson dancers in daring. Founded in the early 1960s by Mr. Mumma and Mr. Ashley, the group also enlists the talents of painter Mary Ashley, film maker George Manupelli, and architects Joseph Wehrer and Harold Borkin, among others. A "concert" given by the Once Group is an experience not likely to be forgotten. It can and frequently does include every kind of medium, danger, wit, and surprise. The audience may find its reactions actually shaping and composing the sounds through loudspeakers, as in Mr. Ashley's *Public Opinion Descends on the Demonstrators* (1961). At an Ann Arbor avant-garde festival in 1965, the Once Group staged a remarkable mixed-media performance in a three-story parking lot, *Unmarked Interchange*, in which sound, dance, and "event" material was performed against the giant backdrop of an old Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers film.

'Dry and Precious'

Discussing the origin and development of the Once Group, Mr. Ashley reveals

once again the strength of the central idea controlling all the disparate, shocking, puzzling activities that make up the New Dance and New Music. "We began to transform our music into theater pieces because of Cage, I think," he explains. "He had always been involved with theater. We felt contemporary music was getting very dry and precious. Another way to put it is that technology has given us all the opportunity to make perfect compositions. I can sit in my electronic studio, like Babbitt, and produce a perfect tape of what I want, every sound to the last decibel, all by myself. But I and others feel that's a kind of dead end. The answer, you might say, is theater of a kind, devoted to the materials of daily life."

What the New Music is trying to do is to make us look again at the lowly and the mean and the inconsequential. Worse, we are asked to look at or hear these things by themselves, without benefit of any order imposed by the artist. The new composers rarely attempt to fit their materials into any preordained meaning. Rather they try to get their own egos out of the way so the materials, sound or activity, will take over.

"The highest purpose," Mr. Cage once wrote, "is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accord with nature in her manner of operation." Such sentiments clash directly, of course, with the Renaissance (if not the medieval) conception of art, on which most of us were weaned, a conception of art as something fused by the individual ego into a solid, personal meaning. This clash explains our uneasiness in the presence of all the new art, but particularly avant-garde music, where the movement away from old forms is in some quarters almost meteoric.

—DOUGLAS M. DAVIS