

Sonar for the darkness

I've been thinking more about the Sonic Arts Union and listening to their recent Mainstream album, and I want to try to give a more general view of what these four composers are doing. Though I have reservations about some of their pieces, they form an important group and have made important contributions to recent musical developments. All four are in the 35 to 40 age range, and each one has a mature professional grasp of what he is doing. Unlike most groups, they have no creative collaboration, so the only way of dealing with them is to discuss each member separately.

Robert Ashley was one of the founders of the ONCE Festival at the University of Michigan, which was an important avant-garde festival of the '60s. He is currently co-director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College. I have already described his tape piece, "Quartet Describing the Imaginary Motions of Large Real Bodies," which is something like a collage of creaking door sounds, beautifully organized rhythmically, and complemented effectively by faint breathing sounds in the background.

Ashley's contribution on the new album is a segment from his theatre piece, "The Wolfman Motorcity Revue." A disassociated female voice says, "I remember he tried to put his gun in my mouth," and continues on into a very discomforting series of violent and erotic images. There are eerie bells and moaning in the background, and it gets pretty heavy, even without staging. I don't have much taste for sadism, but there is no getting around the fact that the piece is a very strong characterization and a thorough rendering of the artist's intentions.

Gordon Mumma also worked with the ONCE Festival, and is well known to dance audiences as a musician for the Merce Cunningham Company. He probably knows as much about electronic sound as anybody, and his music goes far beyond the tape-splicing and dial-turning by which most electronic music is made. For each piece he builds special devices to create whatever effects he wants, and usually these devices are stimulated by live performers in some way. I recently described the complex apparatus which he uses to distort trumpet sounds in "Ambivex."



The equipment used in "Horn-pipe," recorded on the album, is designed to respond to certain frequencies in certain ways. He performs the piece by playing French horn, sounding different notes in different directions, and somehow triggering off a wide variety of electronic responses. Sometimes there is a long delay before the machinery answers back. Many of the sounds are not too attractive, but once you realize that they are happening solely as a result of what he plays on his French horn, the mystery of this man-machine communication becomes pretty mind boggling.

Alvin Lucier, who teaches at Wesleyan University, has also discovered interesting musical applications for electronic devices. I am particularly fond of "The Queen of the South," which is not so much a composition as a situation. It involves a square steel plate about three feet across, with sand sprinkled over it. Several performers make sounds into microphones, which cause the plate to vibrate and create beautiful wave patterns in the sand.

His "Vespers" on the new album is made up of different kinds of clicking, moving around in stereophonic space. The sounds alone are not particularly attractive or impressive, but once you read the liner notes, you can begin to hear them on a more meaningful level. These clicking sounds are created by electronic devices similar to the sonar systems of bats and dolphins, which echo off physical objects, giving information about one's location. So the sounds really represent performers moving in the dark, avoiding collisions only by sensing the echoes. Of course it is really a theatre piece, and an lp cannot do full justice to such an idea, but the stereo separation is good, and the recording creates the illusion better than one might expect.

The last member of the group is David Behrman, who has pro-

duced many important recordings of new music and is now a visiting lecturer at the University of Ohio. I have previously described two of his collaborations with Katharine Morton, "Sine Rise" and "Pools of Phase-Locked Loops." I prefer the latter, but both are lovely pieces, concerned basically with the gradual fading in and fading out of different pitches, and with the harmonies which result from this procedure.

"Runthrough," his contribution to the new album, is also more of a situation than a composition, and again one appreciates it more after reading the liner notes. The piece is an elaborate electronic environment which responds to flashlights as well as to dials and switches. It is intended to be performed in the middle of a circle of loudspeakers, with different performers operating the flashlights and the other controls. There is no score, and the piece may be performed by amateurs since the circuits assure that it will sound, more or less the way it is supposed to sound, regardless of who the performers are or how they react to each other. The "Runthrough" on the album goes through many fascinating changes, and it is interesting, though hopeless, to try to imagine what the performers were doing to create the changes.

The few things in the Sonic Arts Union repertoire which don't work for me are pieces where there seems to be a conflict between what I am seeing and what I am hearing, or where the electronic equipment distracts me from the music itself. A basic appreciation for electronics is often necessary in order to tune in on what they are doing, since so much of their music utilizes unique applications of electronic devices. But aside from this, their pieces are quite accessible, and most of them make strong clear statements. Very few composers work with such new ideas in such successful ways as these four do.

—Tom Johnson

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Mainstream Records Inc.
1700 Broadway
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