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Music: New but Nostalgic

By JOHN ROCKWELL

The evening of new music that David Behrman and Gordon Mumma offered Monday night at the Diplomat Hotel — the last event in the laudable "In Performance at the Diplomat" avant-garde music and dance series—had a sort of nostalgic glow to it.

Mr. Behrman and Mr. Mumma are both veterans of this sort of gently undemanding, neo-1960's affair. They have collaborated frequently in the Sonic Arts Union and at Merce Cunningham performances, and both are leading advocates of a kind of music that appeals on a primal, folk level even as it makes periodic use of sophisticated electronic gear.

Mr. Behrman's piece, "Music for Cello, Microcomputer and Homemade Electronics," was the more purely aural of the two. It offered David Gibson sawing in stately wise upon his cello, with the sounds fed into Mr. Behrman's circuitry and a minicomputer, Kim One, determining the harmonic modulations of the ensuing synthesized sound.

The effect was sonorous and contemplative, with the amplified cello sound blending with an organlike richness of

chordal accompaniment, which would shift abruptly in its harmonic coloration at greater or lesser rates of speed. It was not the most eventful or gripping piece imaginable; but it was often very beautiful: beyond all else, Mr. Behrman has a wonderful ear.

Mr. Mumma's "Some Voltage Drop" (1974) was an hour-long string of smaller pieces that sometimes overlapped but mostly followed one another sequentially. Altogether seven pieces can be used in the entire event, but the order and the option to drop some remain with Mr. Mumma; on Monday he omitted two.

What was left had its indulgent moments, but Mr. Mumma has a strong enough intuitive sense of what is theatrically engaging and musically interesting to keep one's attention pretty constantly. The whole trick with these Cageian potpourris is to maintain a childlike sense of freshness, and that Mr. Mumma has in abundance. Among the numerous events were an eerily lovely solo on a musical saw, with whistling tea-kettle obbligato, the happy burlblings of Paul DeMarinis's "Pygmy Gamelan," a fierce taped-drum interlude and another taped bit of Central Asian folksinging.