



JACK BESHEARS

Gordon Mumma and Alvin Lucier both unite technological skill and artistic ability.

Mumma and Lucier Make New Connections

By Tom Johnson

In rare cases, technological skill and artistic ability occur in equally impressive amounts in single individuals. In this respect, I particularly admire David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma, all three of whom presented their work at the Diplomat Hotel ballroom in the recent series sponsored by Artservices. Behrman is still working with homemade circuitry that emits plaintive automatic harmonies in response to particular pitches played by live instruments, as in concerts I have reviewed in the past. Both Mumma and Lucier presented material that was new to me, and so rich that in one column I can do little more than describe what happened.

Mumma calls his latest work *Some Voltage Drop*. Like

most of his music, this is not a set composition so much as a set of materials. Everything changes and develops from performance to performance. On May 9 he began with a tape of a Central Asian folk singer and then overlapped into a complex and raucous improvisation on a specially designed synthesizer. The next section became theatrical as Mumma lit carbide lamps and put a teakettle on to boil. Behrman joined him, wearing a miner's hat and occasionally blowing on a harmonica. Mumma began playing his musical saw, as he often does, and eventually the wailing of the saw began to blend with the whistling of the teakettle. As the overhead lights faded, the glow of the carbide lamps began to suggest a camping scene. In the

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next section Mumma played a remarkable electronic instrument, built by Paul DeMarinis, which emits curious rhythmic bleeps when a hand is placed over its vital parts. The performance ended with a brief tape of loud vigorous drumming dedicated to Salvador Allende.

The symbolism of this performance was far richer than in any Mumma work I have heard before, and I am not sure I understand it thoroughly, but a few things seem clear. In his interview with Robert Ashley in the *Music with Roots in the Aether* series, Mumma talks a great deal about folk instruments. I think he feels that the pygmy gamelan, the Central Asian singer, the musical saw, the specially designed synthesizer, and the harmonica are all contemporary folk mediums because they resist rotation and thus defy the central dominating culture. One could see the campfire scene as a reference to guerrilla warfare, which would tie in with Mumma's concept of anti-establishment folk culture, as well as with his pro-Allende sentiments. The synthesizer music provides an additional symbol, since this particular circuitry is called "Passenger Pigeon." Passenger pigeons became extinct in 1914, according to the program notes, and Mumma's synthesizer will also become extinct someday, since he removes one component every time he plays it. But I have still only scratched the surface of this complex work as a whole, and the complex emotions it aroused in me. I would have to be able to answer many questions about Mumma's casual performance style, his preference for raucous sounds, and his remarkable technological skills before I could be satisfied that I understand his art thoroughly.

On May 2 Alvin Lucier presented four works, each of which went on for 20 to 30 minutes. All conveyed quiet ritualistic moods, and all had strong visual elements. The means of producing sounds were rather elaborate in each case, but these techniques were always justified because the result was always music that could not be produced in any other way.

For "Tyndall Orchestrations" Lucier sat at the center of the space with a Bunsen burner. John La Barbara was at one side producing soft screechy vocal sounds. Birds sang in a similar manner via a tape recorder. The flame on the Bunsen burner flickered in response to the sound, and sometimes went out. At the four corners of the space, four additional performers lit additional Bunsen burners and placed glass tubes over the flames. The flames flickered and produced soft sounds within their resonating glass tubes. The lighting added additional atmosphere, as it did throughout the evening. This piece, incidentally, is based on the work of the 19th-century acoustician John Tyndall, whose book *The Science of Sound* ought to be required reading for all musicians and composers, and for everyone who tends to think that electronics has made acoustics obsolete. Tyndall experimented with foghorns, sound lenses, the effects of weather on sound, and other acoustical phenomena as well as with these "singing flames."

In "Music on a Long Thin Wire," a wire some 50 feet long was stretched across the performing space. Lucier sat at one side controlling electronic equipment. I didn't quite understand how the vibrations of the wire affected the sound, but the music came out as curious electronic phrases that wailed slowly up and down, sometimes became guttural, and often took unexpected turns.

In "Outlines" one assistant moved a microphone around the contour of a full-size canoe, another assistant walked slowly away from a large loudspeaker, and Lucier did a little imaginary trout fishing, casting his fly line back and forth through the air. The resulting music was soft, high-pitched buzzing. I found it difficult to pay attention at first, because the sound didn't change much and was a bit reminiscent of fluorescent lights and other environmental sounds that I am accustomed to blocking out. Later, however, I began to notice that whenever I turned my head the sound changed drastically. There were really a whole lot of little buzzes hovering around my head. I became fascinated with trying to figure out which one was loudest, trying to pick out my favorite, and generally enjoying this completely new sound experience.

In "Bird and Person Dying" Lucier very gradually approached the center with little microphones mounted in his ears. His eyes were closed most of the time. He listened intently as he moved. At the center of the space was one of those electronic birds that you have probably seen in variety stores, where they are sold as tree ornaments. From the loudspeakers around the space a variety of electronic tones faded in and out, accompanying the repetitious little tree ornament. But there were other tones that slid up and down faintly *inside my ears*. As in most of Lucier's work, some of the acoustical and electronic techniques behind the music were a mystery to me. If I had asked around, I could probably have found someone who could explain how everything worked, and often such pieces arouse my intellectual curiosity enough that I do that. But with this piece, and the others on this program, I found I was quite content to let the music retain its mystery.