

East Meets Left: Fourth Annual San Francisco Electronic Music Festival

Evening of fixed-media compositions presented by The New San Francisco Tape Music Center, SomArts, San Francisco, California, USA, 27 July 2003.

Reviewed by David Bithell
Emeryville, California, USA

The fourth annual San Francisco Electronic Music Festival (SFEMF) concluded its five-day program, "East Meets Left," with an evening of tape music curated by the New San Francisco Tape Music Center (nSFTMC). The nSFTMC is a collective of Bay Area composers dedicated to presenting performances of experimental fixed-media compositions in surround-sound loudspeaker environments. The concert was a mixture of recent compositions by members of the nSFTMC and others, plus three older works: Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*, Iannis Xenakis' *Pour La Paix*, and Tony Schwartz's *Standing Here at the Present Time...A Sound Portrait of New York*. Each piece was diffused in real time through a high-quality 16-loudspeaker array controlled by members of the nSFTMC. This, coupled with the artistic attention given to the sound levels and the spatialization, allowed for a rich and flowing sonic environment.

The emergence of the nSFTMC over the last few years signals, in some sense, a move towards reclaiming certain elements of recently discarded experimental culture. With the growth of personal computing power, much of the current focus in computer music has been on interactive systems and live performance of electronic music. The technological ability for growth in this direction has not, however, necessitated the attrition of fixed-media composition. In fact, the continued maturation of fixed-media composition was apparent in this concert. The comprehensive program (nearly three hours) explored much of the vast terrain of tape music and raised a number of compositional issues that underlie the continued relevance of this medium.

One of the pieces that seemed to simultaneously acknowledge and refute many of the inherited genre-defining markers of tape music was Matt Ingalls' 1997 composition, *f(Ear)*. After a short introduction made up of transformed bell-like resonances, something goes wrong. This is important. The idea that something can go wrong in a piece of tape music—or at least that this impression can be implied—seems antithetical to the entire origin myth of tape music. The move to working with electronics was in part a quest for ever-increasing control for the composer. "No more performers—no more intermediaries," shouted the masses (or so we've been told). With an increasing avalanche of clicks, pops, and sounds seemingly derived from the death of some unloved mixing board, *f(Ear)* attempts to step outside of itself. This is an effect that is almost lost in a private hearing of this piece. The sense of "fear"—that everything has gone wrong and that we will have to sit and wait for the tech crew to painstakingly rewire a complex setup that has imploded—was played up by Mr. Ingalls as he sat behind the mixing board with a well-performed sense of utter panic. The piece continues with an extended silence that is slowly eroded by claustrophobic breathing and high-pitched sine tones, faint reminders of the previous explosion. These "beeps" take on a series of external significations over the remainder of the piece: first as test-tones for a hearing evaluation, then as video-game sound effects and TV censoring beeps. In some ways clearly postmodern, there is an implication of abstract narrative that points beyond mere deconstruction.

Joseph Anderson's *Mpingo*, premiered at this concert, presents some similar attitudes toward compositional material. The piece negotiates the space between a recording session (with Matt Ingalls on bass clarinet) and processed versions of the same sounds. Using the informal, demonstrative style of the recording session (complete with spoken passages between Mr. Anderson and Mr. Ingalls asking for, or explaining, different extended instrumental techniques), the rigorously processed sections of the composition are put in relief. Most importantly, the composition is given a history (i.e., a clear point of origin), and an often rather humorous one at that. The resulting alternations between the recording session (e.g., "Here, let me try this one.") and the processing (e.g., an exploded multiple clarinet sound—clearly impossible for any one person to perform) exploit the theatrical possibilities of material in tape music.

Early tape music that was based on the manipulation of recorded natural sounds dealt in diverse ways with the inherent formal challenges presented by their recorded materials. The sound of a siren, for example, could signify objects (concrete or conceptual) outside of its sonic reality more readily than a more abstract sound could. At one extreme, some composers have adopted the method of making the revelation of the material the form of the piece, where the discovery of the origin of the material is the "meaning" of the piece (e.g., James Tenney's *Collage #1* ("*Blue Suede*"). Analysts looking at such pieces can deploy conceptual tools to try to explain the construction of these rather conceptual pieces. Another compositional method, and another extreme, is to create pieces in which the material is non-referential (only existing as sonic

information), suggesting that material is nothing but a tool for creating form and, thereby, creating "meaning." This method leaves the analyst with the more traditional musical tools of counterpoint, rhythm, timbre, etc.

It is clear by considering all of the pieces of this concert that the issue of material is continually important. Furthermore, perhaps the degree of external signification is an important feature in defining one possible boundary of tape "music." At this point in history, defining "music" is not necessarily meant as an exclusionary act: finding ways of labeling things we don't like as "non-music." Instead, defining some aesthetic boundaries can be useful in unearthing the motivations of a particular artist's approach and finding adequate tools for analysis. For example, one could view a recording of Gertrude Stein reading her poetry as a piece of tape music. There is some validity to this attitude, of course, though it is largely a creative validation. In this case, the tools of literary analysis would likely prove to provide a more compelling reading of the work. Simply stated, the medium does not necessarily define genre. Two pieces on the concert clearly illustrate this situation.

Tony Schwartz's *Standing Here at the Present Time... A Sound Portrait of New York* is an early piece of sound art from 1964 that behaves more like a documentary film or sonic photograph than it does like music. For three decades, Mr. Schwartz created and produced a radio show of people and sounds that he recorded on WNYC in New York. Composed to accompany an exhibit of New York City photography, *Standing Here at the Present Time...* is built from some of the vast number of field recordings and interviews he collected. There is much reverence given to these sounds: they are presented with a love of the people from which they came. Presented in their "natural" form with very little processing—much like the radio interviews of Studs Terkel—the beauty of the composition is its ability to appear as though it was not composed. As listeners, we seem to hear the grit and beauty of an era more than we hear Mr. Schwartz's take on that grit and beauty. In part, this is because almost all of the sounds signify specific objects in this piece. When we hear the opening foghorn roar, it is more than an opening gesture, it evokes a representation of "our" world rather than a "composed" world. This is only furthered as the piece moves through accented interviews and other markers of place. In the end, the piece is constructed by the bounds of a geographic and temporal space and, simultaneously, recreates it.

New York-based visual artist and composer Christian Marclay's composition, *Black Stucco*, is also a collage work. This piece from 1986 runs by quickly (it lasts only three minutes), paced like a radio with a hyperactive seek button. Over the top of a variety of LP-quality recordings there are the sounds of DJ-like scratching, at times linking the disparate clips (as a kind of voice-leading device), at other times acting as an independent soloist. There are some amusing sonic links between the diverse sound sources, although the clarity of physical space and narrative that binds the previous piece is not as apparent. Here the emphasis is clearly in the realm of "composition:" the composer's whimsy is more important than the material itself. Through choices concerning the length and processing of clips, Mr. Marclay distances himself from the more documentary presentation of the previous work.

Other pieces on the concert were not as distinctly engaged in the process of questioning the possible boundaries of tape music, but, rather, focused their energy in the continuation of a (relatively) long tradition of well-crafted, timbrally-rich, fixed-media compositions.

For example, Thom Blum's *nomen plaid*, another premiere at the concert, dives into the heart of the formal responsibilities that sounds have when placed next to each other. Using purely synthesized sounds, the question of material is shifted from where sounds come from to how they behave. Very inventive and playful, this piece moves confidently through many different spaces weaving a fabric of "disparate sonic threads." The structure of the piece is aided by careful attention on Mr. Blum's part to the similarities between adjacent sounds and to the timing of the propagation and disruption of these sonic similarities.

Adrian Moore, director of the electroacoustic studios at Sheffield University, completed his composition *Superstrings* in 1999. Technically, it grows out of recordings made of string sounds from piano and harpsichord. Conceptually, it navigates the space between these "natural" sounds and various processed versions thereof. The tension between these two aspects is meant to parallel the tension present between energy and matter (the title *Superstrings* relates to the scientific theory of matter). Similar to Mr. Anderson's *Mpingo* in terms of its instrumental origin, this piece does not, however, concern itself with the theatrical possibilities presented by a natural sound and its electronic shadow. Instead, it uses repetition, harmonically-driven processing, and timbral relationships to create a sense of formal counterpoint.

Bay Area composer and sound designer Cliff Caruthers' new composition, *Resist*, is an expression of frustration with the current political climate. Following a very pure beginning of slowly fading harmonies, sounds of rallies and demonstrations swell into the foreground surrounded by the sound of a persistent and threatening helicopter. These sounds evolve into the sounds of war and, finally,

a transformed Muslim call to prayer. The formal clarity of the piece, while serving as a clear metaphorical progression of the processes we are told to resist, lacks a degree of subtlety that could truly enliven the subject matter. Still, the message is told and that is, by itself, important.

The gradual transformation from one state to the next has always been a technical challenge and a formal stumbling block. Elaine Lillios's composition, *Dreams in the Desert* from 2001, tackles the same issue in another way. The music slowly evolves from one timbral climate to another in the realization of her self-labeled "sonic journey." The result, often filled with a rich harmonic stasis created by resonant filters, does create a sense of place, a landscape first of water, then of dry branches and leaves, and, finally, of muffled voices. In this piece, the metaphorical quality is less clear and the stopping points along the way more diverse than the previous piece, making it less of a message and more a piece of music.

Formally one large swell from beginning to end, *What the Thunder Said* by Aaron Ximm takes sounds from a field recording he made in Nepal and layers them on top of each other with the aim to "catch the moment as it was, catching myself as I was." Premiered at the concert in its original eight-channel format, this piece is part of his "Quiet American" project in which he attempts to share the world's beauty through sound. Similar in some regards to Tony Schwartz's sonic portrait of New York, the overall feel is quite different. Most obviously, New York City doesn't sound like a Nepalese jungle. But also, the higher quality of Mr. Ximm's recording equipment and his choice of smoothly layered sounds (as opposed to sudden cuts between sound clips) shape the gentleness of this piece.

The last premiere on the concert, *Bellbox*, by sound designer and composer Kent Jolly, is in three continuous sections that variously approach the sound of bells. The first section slowly filters and transposes a jumble of bells with occasional swells of traffic noise. The traffic sounds on the tape playfully interacted with the unwanted traffic sounds that bled in from the highway near the performance space. The second section slowly assembles a virtual gamelan-like ensemble from the bell sounds, while the third section is overtaken completely by the traffic sounds layered like the bells at the beginning.

The two remaining pieces on the concert were by Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis. Though readily available on commercial recordings, both benefited from public performance. The four-channel tape version of the landmark 1956 composition, *Gesang der Jünglinge*, still utilizes space in a provocative fashion. Projected supertitles (realized by Kent Jolly) for Xenakis's still-timely 1982 statement against war, *Pour La Paix*, made the French text intelligible to the many non-French speakers in the audience (author included).

To consider fully the possible range of tape music is to devote oneself to a long study. The variety of approaches presented in this concert alone is not done justice by their brief treatment in this review. Similarly, the work done by the nSFTMC toward promoting, composing, and presenting exciting concerts of tape music is a promising feature of the West Coast new music scene, and deserves praise well beyond these pages.

