

Subotnick, an innovative ear opener

by M. Lynn Briend

We've all heard the cliché - Music is the universal language. Just as we've all heard it, we have each a different interpretation of it. Some the messages are in the cantankerous drowning of pop, rock and new wave. Twentieth Century composers fight the incessant battle, but it's a lot of little wars being won in a non battle. Haydn and Mozart worked within a sense of 'balance': but for Beethoven this just didn't jive, and the metaphor of 'evolution' thrived. "Relativity" initiated the 20th Century, but lately, the concept of, one tone being as good as another, is not considered poetic. Thus drastic changes occur and language becomes unique to each composer.

Morton Subotnick was the latest guest composer for the Innovation Music series last Sunday at the Rebecca Cohn and during the introductions shared his wizened view - "wrought of long years in the field of electronic music throughout North America and Europe" - of language comprehension and multimedia resources. Noted as a pioneer in the field and an innovator in multimedia expression he intertwines instrumental compositions with various visual and aural mediums, such as film, theatre and tape. A native of San Francisco, he is a co-founder of the San Francisco Actors Workshop and a long standing faculty member at several universities.

The program was mind boggling. For the new-comer it was perhaps, overwhelming; for the avid listener it was, without hesitation, engrossing, and different.

The major portion of the

chosen work stemmed from Subotnick's metaphor of a butterfly, which, he says, beginning as a caterpillar, "things just are". The coon stage stops the outer existence and develops mysteriously within, into a most beautiful stage, a butterfly - the initial theme returns refined and perfected.

The opening tape, "A Sky of Cloudless Sulphur," was a prime example of the metaphor. It was commissioned in 1963. Four speakers positioned around the Cohn, amplified a work which engulfed the audience. Seated in darkness, the listener consumed the percussive timbres which grew from each other; at times in dialogue, at other times in conflict.

Sparse in sound, the cocoon stage panned back and forth altering in texture and complexity till the (ahem) arrival of the butterfly. The music of the happy creature had greater continuity. Mental images could be envisioned with the flowing rhythmic intricacies. The simplicity of the tongo drum-like sounds resonated in closing.

"Play No. 1" gave the audience a good laugh. Subotnick's ingenuity combined player, tape and film, and affirmed the work as the most humorous piece. Written for theatre as a series of four plays, Mr. Subotnick used gestures expressing the anticipated kinetic energy of the music. The choreographed score demanded the woodwind players, flutist, Steve Pederson, oboeist, Margaret Pheby, clarinetist, Gail Jebson, bassoonist, Kimbal Bird, horn player, Laurie Matiation and pianist Clari Friesen to maintain faces of stone and obscure body movements as the

audience roared in laughter. Dressed mockingly in formal orchestral apparel of tucks and long black gowns the performers dramatized a musician's concentrated glare into the score, (as his nose practically rubbed into it), the resentment of a performer playing the theme, as all eyes drilled bullets through the victim, or the hilarious magnification of an over zealous performer who sacrifices his technique for a "flashy" performance - so brilliantly interperated by Claire Friesen. In actuality, the music itself was incomprehensible - saved only by the combination of theatrical delivery, and an aged hissing tape and film.

In the second half of the program the audience was sadly reminded of the metaphor of a butterfly. The "ghost" metaphor was then introduced.

This mind blowing "Butterfly 1" left but a strange, inquisical taste lingering. The visuals, two non coordinating films of parts of the body, and the light score, controlled by the synthesizer, seemingly closed in on the listener. Slowly the audience started to applaud - stunned.

"Life History 2", written in 1977 was the first glimpse of the ghost. The hardware was simple, yet effective. Basically via amplifiers, panning frequency pitch, and amplitude controls, the acoustics were altered. It became the performer who manifested the sound from those prerecorded on tape.


The fine performance by Gail Jebson, clarinetist, and Steve Tittle, vocalist, revealed a melodrama of the soul. Yet, because of tape manipulation the typical definition of "musicality" was lost. (Both structure and lyrics

conjured for the audience the biblical concepts of sin.)

Concluding the afternoon's performance, the major work of the program "Liquid Strata" emanated the powerful and totally confident playing of pianist Tietje Zonneveld. Based on the Laws of Motion, it developed in three sections: gentle pendulum - as a tick perpetuated throughout, pulsation and finally, the frantic perpetual motion stage. Without doubt the

work was a monster. It demanded an incredible energy drive, a solid technique and refined musical comprehension. The array of colors varied from the inner strings of the grand, reverberating 'normal' tones, contrasting muted sounds, to the unique deception of the electric piano. Rhythmic intricacies led to total changes in mood. It was happy, sad, hum-

continued on page 20



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