

Drawing on a variety of influences, Ensemble's work warms audience

By JOHN KARPENKO

For a musical aggregation that had never appeared in Toronto as a complete unit before last week, The Art Ensemble of Chicago certainly set out to rectify matters for those local fans interested in some of the most exuberant new sounds in Black American music. Besides playing to an enthusiastic sold-out house at Burton Auditorium last Wednesday, they also found time to arrange a special workshop and clinic for York music students on Thursday, a solo recital by reed specialist Joseph Jarman at the A Space Concert Series on Friday, and an impromptu series of concerts at the Toronto Workshop Productions Theatre on Saturday and Sunday.

The performance at Burton last Wednesday was an excellent example of the Art Ensemble's ability to draw on an extremely wide variety of musical influences in creating an excitingly creative musical event full of fluidity and control. Snatches of familiar tunes and composed melodies meshed with freely orchestrated collective and solo improvisations, highly complicated structural forms and a perfectly communicated sense of theatrical fun into a combination which couldn't help but generate an atmosphere of warmth throughout the hall.

The Art Ensemble's greatest achievement in terms of being saddled with the label of an "avant garde jazz ensemble" seems to be in its ability to achieve a group sound which encourages rather than discourages the listener to join in exploring new musical sounds along with its members. Even during the searing saxophone solos of reedmen Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman, the logic behind such aggressive explorations was obvious as a natural outgrowth of the wide spectrum of sound that the group had to offer for the receptive ear and not as simply



Lester Bowie and Malachi Favors show York students how it's done.

unrestrained "noise".

During a workshop held for members of the York Music department on Thursday, the group discussed some of its concepts of musical organization, its musical background, and some of the particular elements of the previous night's concert. Trumpet player Lester Bowie was asked why he was the only member of the group who didn't also play the vast array of percussion instruments that filled the stage almost to overflowing. The trumpet was all he could play, he said, hence no one forced him to do anything else. He added that he wore a white lab coat on stage to signify that he was the Ensemble's "specialist".

When asked to explain the relationship between Roscoe Mitchell's extended sax duet with Joseph Jarman towards the end of the concert and the singing melody that closed the show in an almost vaudevillian mood, everyone in the group agreed that such a juxtaposition was an essential part of understanding their music as an extension of the tradition of Black American music from which it grew. In acknowledging how important traditional black music was to each of them (Lester Bowie's

comment was "we shuffled for years...") they also emphasized that the music of the Art Ensemble is highly structured and to a great extent pre-planned with regard to the form of events which take place at each performance.

Simply performing whatever might occur to them on the spur of the moment would soon get to be as boring for them as it likely would for the audience, perhaps even more so since, they noted, they'd have to listen to it every day.

In order to avoid such a problem, Bowie and Jarman explained that the group is constantly examining its performances in the most excruciating detail, at what they term a "scientific" level, in order to figure out what kinds of things will and won't work musically.

Above all, the ensemble made it abundantly clear that their music is something to which they are completely dedicated, and which they, as a co-operative musical unit, hope can 'have value' in communicating positively with people. To this reviewer, and I suspect to most people who heard them at Burton Auditorium last Wednesday, there is little doubt that it does just that.

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