

Gray and Barteaux's new music packs them in

by Kenneth Newman

As I promised last week, John Gray and David Barteaux played a concert on Thursday at SMU's Art Gallery. However, I was not, as promised, sitting front row center because I only showed up fifteen minutes before show-time. By then the best seats had been taken.

By show time all the seats had been taken and there still weren't enough. More chairs had to be

found and they still weren't enough so some people sat on tables or stood. In all, an amazing feat - 150 people at a "new music" concert in Halifax? Now either Gray has a lot of fans in Halifax or a lot of people trust my writing and I'm more inclined to believe the former than the latter.

Barteaux opened the night with a structured improvisation called "(SUB) SET". The piece was

played on a series of analog sequencers through ring modulation and possibly other devices which this punter's ears couldn't identify. The piece was conceptual and virtually played itself, Barteaux being somewhat tentative (perhaps that's his style?) at the controls. I found the music to be predictable in progression and flat in tone but this could be said for most conceptual music. I guess I'm saying I

don't much like conceptual music. But there were people there who do, and, judging from the applause, they liked it.

Gray followed with an improvisation called "Nine Year Obsession", a title which refers to an incident which occurred nine years ago when the SMU Art Gallery's grand piano was first unveiled. Gray promised himself then and there that someday he would play that piano in that room in concert, hence the title. The piece began with a haunting and eerie part for Polyphonic Moog Synthesizer and Moog Taurus II bass pedals. A synthesized wind storm set the mood until Gray left a drone on the Polymoog and moved to the grand piano. Gray played a technically flawless ten minute solo, flush with arpeggios and full, ponderous chording. He was virtually punning his way through nineteenth-century piano music. His style is such that if he runs an arpeggio up the keyboard he runs one back down again - he leaves no chord unresolved. The result is slightly predictable if you listen very closely, but if you just sit back and shut your eyes the music flows and flows on an extremely pleasant journey.

Photo/Delise

After a fifteen minute intermission, during which some of the "merely curious" departed for less high-minded pursuits, the two musicians returned. They played a long improvisation which was rather superfluously titled,

"UNTITLED (IMPROVISATION)". After a short bit of atonal (or is it dissonant or non-tonal?) electronic interplay, a few sequencer patterns were layered together and a very sophisticated electronic drum set placed beneath.

Barteaux played some very interesting and unidentifiable weird sounds on top of the mix while Gray seemed somewhat inhibited by the sheer electricity of it all and by Barteaux's obvious command of the situation. Gray was at his best when he was mimicking the sequencers on the piano. The piece, aside from being slightly over-long, suffered from unevenness. When it clicked, which was about half the time, it clicked very well, but the rest of the time the music seemed bogged down in indecision. What bothered me was that the piece had a lot of potential and could have been vastly improved by a few weeks of rehearsal or perhaps by lapsing a bit from the improvisatory ethos and adding a bit of composition. If they were in a recording studio I'd say they need a good producer to push them when they need it and to restrain them when they need it.

On the whole, the performance was well worth my and anyone else's while. The audience, which came out in droves on a rainy night, was diverse, attentive and appreciative. I shall await the next appearance of these two.



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