

Soft Music '86 . . .

Glimpses of a tangible future for music

Excilibur's R.D. Macpherson, together with ace photographer Gary Blakeley, attended last week's Soft Music '86. They filed this report.

By R.D. MACPHERSON

"Music is making music decisions," asserts Bill Buxton, one of many who addressed, presented or simply attended Soft Music '86 this past Friday. This event showcased some of the most recent—and often affordable—computer software systems applicable to music. In doing so, it underscored the fact that, indeed, "making music decisions" is becoming an increasingly complex task.

All arts engage in some sort of dialogue with their time period; if not in a palpable manner (in analysis of content) then at least in the concrete forms, the bits and pieces that can be plucked from the world and applied to the art. Oil painting was, appropriately enough, predicated upon the invention of oil paint. Contemporary film usually uses the built environment as its stage. In a similar manner, music is undergoing a new period of appropriation, this time from the area of computer technology. We find musicians involved in the production of the hardware and the software, but a substantial number of non-musicians as well. Do musicians need and/or want the new technology? The attendance at Soft Music '86 proved that there is at least a great interest in it.

Soft Music's director, York professor Stirling Beckwith, assembled an impressive collection of humans



Left: Bill Buxton demonstrates the Amiga "player-piano" effect.

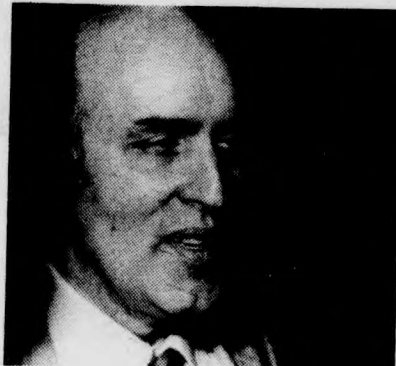
Bottom left: High technology not only works well, it looks terrific, too.

Bottom right: York professor Stirling Beckwith in a cerebral moment.



and technologies. The computers composed, performed, and displayed new means of graphic notation.

One programme was able to create an entire orchestration around the one-finger keyboard playing of a participant stumbling through the Beatle's Eleanor Rigby. With a



broad range of programmable effects, another programme provided immediate embellishment to the (pedestrian) saxophone playing of Buxton. In short, neither musician

would ever have to practice alone, or at least without a complete "shadow band" no further away than his nearest stack of floppy disks. With an accuracy available to within 1/800th of a second, this "band" really cooks.

Participant Joe Lyons demonstrated his computer graphic programme. He holds the thesis that conversion of music into graphic information will ultimately teach students about sounds and music better than traditional methods. His, and other, graphic programmes render in interpretive visual form just what exactly the music is doing. The oscilloscope will likely go the way of the west, as these software technologies offer an inconceivable amount of possibilities for information about sound and music.

Similarly, the software disk will replace printed sheet music, accord-

ing to professor Beckwith. Of course, this would necessitate that the modern student purchase a computer, should he wish to remain at or near the musical forefront. The modern student will benefit immensely from this bright technological future: he can compose on the computer; have it transpose individual elements within a multi-part score; instruct it to play along with him; he can generate lovely complimentary graphics (integrated media), etc. The modern student will be exposed early to the new technology, so he will not suffer technophobia. He will have greater musical literacy than today's student. In short, we in attendance at the Soft Music '86 event saw glimpses of a tangible future for music. Unfortunately, while such events do much to promote the cutting edge of an art form, one can only question the extent of its accessibility. The gulf between those who can afford the computers and those who cannot will likely enlarge and will be well documented in the music produced by both.

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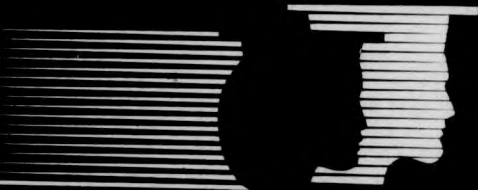
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