

David Keane

Reflections on the Electronic Music Festival

It is almost a truism that the artistic aspect of electronic music and computer music has been left far behind in the rush of technological development over the last several decades. The evidence can be found at any program of "experimental" music: the electronic music tends to be a glorified demonstration of the new capabilities of the composer's hardware but the music is usually naive and uninteresting, if not offensive. Works created with sophisticated computer systems tend to be even more musically naive. A mediocre piece of music is usually hailed as a great achievement at such gatherings, simply because people are so desperate for something to support their own belief that abundantly fruitful potential really does lie within the capabilities of the electronic medium. For those of us so oriented, it takes ever greater strength of will to continue in the belief as time passes.

We have only to look at journals and conference contributions to see that the content is virtually totally dedicated to the physical systems upon which the music is produced and not to the music itself. Concerts are another matter, because concerts centre on musical performance. The more we produce or attend electronic music concerts the more frequently we will be reminded of the aesthetic weaknesses and moved to do better. Consequently, the promise of an annual festival of electronic music in Canada is well worth our effort to insure that it is a promise fulfilled. In the more than twenty years that electronic music composition has flourished in Canada, there has been little opportunity for exchange among composers beyond the means of personal junkets to the six or seven major centres of electronic music making strung out over more than 5,000 miles. As someone quipped at the First Annual Festival of Electronic Music (17-20 January): "At last! an opportunity for people to find out what Canadian composers are doing in electronic music without having to go to Bourges." (Bourges, France is the site of the 'Festival Internationale de Musique Expérimental' where the products of the world's major studios are put on display each year.) Canada has contributed significantly beyond her measure to the development of electronic music as is evidenced by her prominence at Bourges and other international electronic and computer music rites, but Canadian composers seem to have relied upon their compatriots little more than they have their international colleagues. This is not to say that Canadians should be striving to establish a national identity in their electronic music but rather that, since they share the same training, institutions, performance resources, funding agencies, and cultural inheritance, an acquaintance with the current objectives and accomplishments of their counterparts spread out over those 5,000 miles is of inestimable value. Not only can competition for the same resources be more intelligently conducted but the number of times the wheel needs to be reinvented might be reduced to a mere two or three.

The First Annual Electronic Music Festival provided all of the amenities one could expect: an occasion for intensive discussion about electronic music, its underpinnings and its future directions; the impetus or focal point for new works and implementation of new ideas; and an opportunity for composers as well as those not involved in electronic music making to witness directly samples of current work from a variety of electronic music centres.

There was an emphasis on "live" electronic music at the festival, but the term had a variety of applications:

Acoustical sources plus prepared tape

(Media Explorations, Keane)

Acoustical sources with electronic modification

(Media Explorations, Waveband, GIMEL, CEE)

Analog electronic sources

(Waveband, CEE, Teitelbaum)

Analog sources under digital control

(Bartlett, Rosenboom)

Digital sources

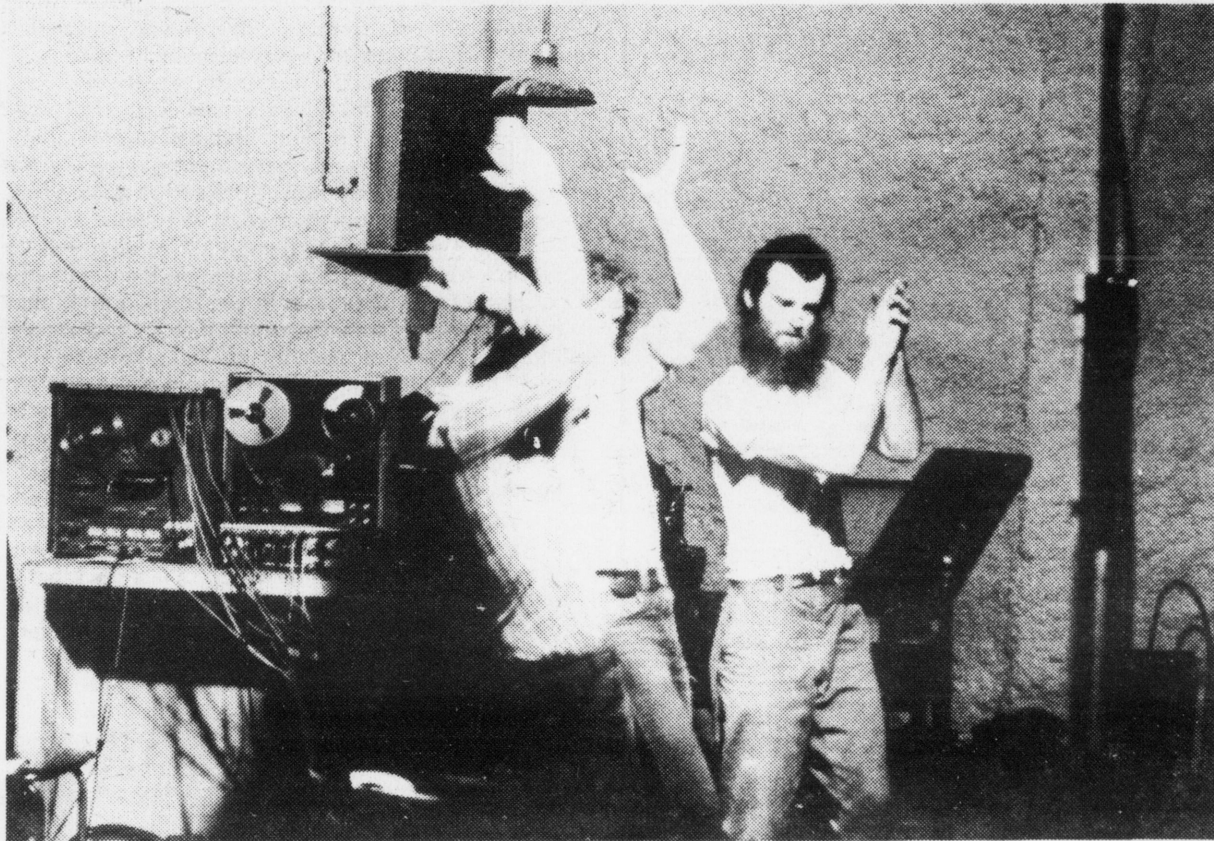
(Buxton)

Regardless of the means, one of the distinctive weaknesses of nearly all of the performances was a tendency to prolong the pieces beyond the ability of the material to sustain the listener's interest. One of the particularly interesting factors about electronic music is that the energy for some, much, or even all of the sound is electrical rather than human. That is not good or bad in itself, but I think effortless generation may encourage the electronic music composer to indulge himself in prolonged excursions of exploration. Such excursions are fine as an aid to the composer's development as an artist, but I am not convinced that prolonged explorations are something to which audiences wish to be subjected. Of course, the longer a piece is, the better the odds are that the composer/performer will produce some rewarding moments. But what is not always taken into account is

the listener's fatigue — if the listener has stopped listening, the eventual emergence of an interesting passage will be of little use.

There seems to be some good, old-fashioned show business left in those performances in which one movement of the performer results in one event, or at least one perceptible alteration in the flow of events. Even when the musical relationship eludes the listener, there is at least the action-consequence relationship to fill the void. Richard Teitelbaum's performance was fascinating in this respect because he rarely made a movement which did not result in an equivalent sonic event. To obtain the variety he employed in his performance, a reasonable amount of knob twiddling is necessary, but he seems to have appreciated the audience's desire to be in on the performance process and made his most overt operations those which initiated an event and those operations which did not were kept to a minimum and as covert as possible. I am not asserting an objective here because ideally music is fascinating to its listener owing purely to the way it sounds. I am merely observing that when the music is not entirely fascinating on its own, the right kind of visual reinforcement can provide psychological support.

Teitelbaum and Martin Bartlett exhibited considerable sensitivity in the pacing and selection of events during their performances, but the timbral and envelope characteristics had that raw, overly uniform quality one associates with synthesizers. The aspect which is missing here is not novelty or elaboration but rather the subtle shades between the elements which are employed.



Media Explorations

Electronic sources are frequently used much as an artist might apply his paints directly from the tube without blending — the elements are only what they are, they do not develop interrelationships or oppositions, they are merely juxtaposed; the elements never become, as an integral unit, something greater than the simple sum of those elements.

I was intrigued by something that Bartlett did in his performances, however. On a number of occasions in both his solo piece and his collaboration with David Rosenboom, he employed sudden bursts of sound very like the kind that frequently occur when a pot is accidentally turned up to too great an amplitude or when a new patch produces an unexpectedly high level. At these points the level was just at the threshold of distortion for the sound system. Only the angelic expression on Bartlett's face and the lack of an immediate corrective action suggested that these were anything but accidents. The rather plodding cyclic character of the source material and the slow and not particularly meaningful metamorphosis of the material was refreshingly penetrated by these dynamic discontinuities. I do not know whether Bartlett uses this technique intentionally or whether he has an ingenious method for covering errors. Either way the result is worth attention.

The raw sonic characteristics that I mentioned in connection with Bartlett and Teitelbaum gave way to a silky, polished quality in the digitally-controlled Buchla system that David Rosenboom employed. Rosenboom's

system seemed a Rolls Royce in a lot full of Volkswagens. But even a Rolls Royce left to its own initiative will not provide a very interesting trip. There are essentially two ways of extracting music from synthesizers:

1. you set the synthesizer up so that you can obtain a variety of sounds by poking the synthesizer somewhere (one poke equals one event), or
2. you program the synthesizer so that it cycles itself through a series of events and your job is to ride herd on the general outcome, gently guiding this way and that, while the synthesizer takes care of the details.

The second approach, used to a considerable extent by both Rosenboom and Bartlett, results in highly repetitive, low-information pieces. The pieces are not unattractive but the meditative quality allows, or even encourages, the listener to sink into his own thoughts rather than to engage in a mental dialogue with the composer/performer. Repetitive music may well have a therapeutic value but I wonder how much more it does for the listener than the sound of, say, an addressograph machine. I am perhaps somewhat overstating my case here, because the performances of both Bartlett and Rosenboom, as well as every other performer at the festival were distinctly musical. The dispassionate, mechanical quality that frequently characterizes electronic music in which most of the creative energies went into machine building rather than music making was patently absent from the First Annual Electronic Music Festival. That, in itself, is a great achievement. But

musicality notwithstanding, there was a great deal of room for more concentrated and more carefully chosen content.

With each concert of electronic music, I hear further evidence of a significant conservative trend toward greater simplicity of structure at all levels and an increasing fondness for tonality and diatonicism. The trend was strongly in evidence at this festival in portions of nearly everyone's work but perhaps strongest in Richard Teitelbaum's score for the excellent film, *Asparagus*. Neo-impressionism might be the term to describe the fondness for rich sonorities and textures, made possible by electronic means. This is supported by a directness and simplicity of form and an emphasis on an interlocking of parameters to create progressions meant to be more significant than a mere wallowing in individual events. The idiom does not reject the past decades of formalism and aleatoric procedures, however. Growing out of both traditions, the best moments, though few, are unrestrained by the fetters of past musical clichés and exhibit a lack of contrivance. The central emphasis is evenly distributed over all of the sonic parameters which can be so subtly controlled over impressive ranges. I am optimistic that this idiom is going to see development into works of considerable beauty and merit in the next decade.

I look forward with enormous anticipation to the Second Annual Electronic Music Festival.

Judy Whalen