

Electronic Music for Fun and Torture

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Composers Inside Electronics at The Kitchen

Someday you may plug in your electronic composing module and have it turn out a masterpiece on the spot. But in 1978, electronic music is still only as good as the human composer behind it. This was the impression left by Composers Inside Electronics, a group of four musicians who recently gave a series of live electronic concerts at The Kitchen.

The name of the group has more than one meaning. Obviously, the composers are working inside the field of electronics. It also, the group believes that electronic instruments have personalities that suggest their own musical ideas. It is almost as if there were a composer with his own style inside the electronic equipment. But after hearing the first three concerts, with compositions of John Driscoll, Ralph Jones, and Martin Kalve, it became clear that if Mr. Transistor has some interesting ways of fiddling with sounds, he is no artist. In fact, it seemed possible that he would sabotage the efforts of any artist, turning a musical performance into a scientific demonstration or a philosophical argument. It was only during the last of the four concerts, when David Tudor presented his *Forest Speech*, that the work of

Composers Inside Electronics, which had been interesting and edifying, also seemed inspired.

Not that there was any shortage of gadgetry in Tudor's excellent composition. Hanging from the ceiling were all sort of "found objects," which the uninitiated might be tempted to call "junk." There were shiny reflectors, a wooden organ pipe, metal air ducts, several plastic industrial casings in shapes that would blend with the decor of Radio City Music Hall, and other odds and ends. A tangle of wires connected all these "instruments" to four work tables cluttered with amplifiers, mixers, tape recorders and other components. It looked rather like the trappings of your local radio repair shop.

Along with many speech-like sounds, *Forest Speech* often seemed to mimic environmental sounds that are usually not thought of as speech or music, like squawks, static, and claps of thunder. But noise never sounded so good. Tudor arranged the sounds into an elaborate whole that was enchanting to the ear, stirring to the emotions, and often simply beautiful.

Talk of beauty is not exactly the rage in electronic music circles these days. Pick up a copy of *The Evolution of Electronic Music*, David Ernst's recent survey of the field, and you will see what I mean. Mr. Ernst provides analysis upon analysis in exhaustive detail of a staggering number

of compositions. He catalogues how the pieces are put together and what kind of technology is used. All the information is extremely valuable (except for occasional gaffes, such as identifying the upper limit of human hearing more than three times too high). But within this encyclopedia of facts, there is virtually no report of how the music affects the listener. The reader finds out who did what, but gets scarcely an inkling of which music would be most enjoyable to hear. It seems as if, when music becomes engulfed in technology, questions of taste become obsolete or irrelevant.

Of course, they do not. Along comes a work like *Forest Speech* and puts your values back where they belong. Here is music that delights your mind as it moves excitedly through the sound world. And it makes the imagination run wild. Sections of the piece sounded like low-fidelity ethnomusicological recordings, albums like *Pygmies of the Iturbe Forest*. Other sections of the piece could have been subtitled "War of the Penguins." Through it all, a large metal hemisphere belched steadily like an old radiator. To try to suppress such associations, in the interest of hearing the music as sound for sound's sake, was like looking at Magritte's painting of a pipe which bears the inscription, in French, "This is not a pipe."

But it is just as well to let such associations emerge, for part of the fun of electronic music is that it can wreak havoc on your associations and force you to reconsider how you recognize certain sounds. For example, the performer can turn a dial to change the bandwidth, and the voice of a seagull becomes the pound-

ing of industrial machinery. Radio static becomes running water. These were the kind of fascinating transformations that occurred in Ralph Jones's composition, *Star Networks at the Singing Point*.

Jones is surely a virtuoso at sound synthesis. More than one listener was unsure whether, during the performance, a truck really did rumble down Wooster St. Jones assured me that all of the noises in his composition had been produced electronically, although they sounded as real as the pneumatic drill tearing up the sidewalk outside my window as I write. They also sounded as grating. And louder. If aesthetic questions are debatable, the threshold of pain in the human auditory system is a simple fact. More than 120 decibels hurts, and that limit was exceeded far too often during the hour and a half that *Star Networks* lasted.

There was a similar problem in Martin Kalve's *Earthing*. Here musicians passed inductive microphones over the found objects, so that when nodes of resonance were found, the objects would "sing." More often, they screeched at unbearable intensity levels. These were the kinds of sounds that keep patients away from their dentist's office.

Such noise problems could easily be modified with a turn of the volume control. The seemingly loose and rambling organization of all the pieces except Tudor's is a harder problem for the composer to solve. Meandering through the sound world is not necessarily making music. A composer can roam in his studio, or laboratory, but in the concert hall, he needs to know where he is going.

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