

Music on videotape

BY TOM JOHNSON

Almost every composer and musician I know is troubled in one way or another by the conflicts between live performance and recording. If one wants music to circulate, it is almost essential to make it work both ways, and yet just about every musical decision becomes a vote for one or the other. To compound the problem, a third medium, videotape, is now available, and it poses a third set of problems and possibilities.

Richard Landry has been attempting to fit his music in all three of these moulds, and it is interesting to observe how different the results are. I recently heard two of his record albums, which seemed quite ordinary, a live solo concert, which was impressive on a performance level, and three videotapes, which were successful on just about every level.

Video art is still a relatively new genre, of course, and so far, few musicians have attempted to deal with it. It is a rapidly growing field, however, and places like the Castelli Gallery, which handles these works of Landry's, now distribute videotapes to a number of libraries and museums around the country. In most cases the tapes were never intended for actual broadcast, and some of them are designed to be

Richard Landry

On videotape, in solo concert, and on records.

viewed in specific gallery situations. The three Landry videotapes I saw all involve filming a solo instrument while Landry is playing it, and each tape has a unique twist which places it in an artistic category quite apart from any musical program one might see on commercial TV.

"Sax" uses a split screen image of Landry and his saxophone. On one side we see a close-up of one hand, and on the other side we see a close-up of the other hand. The hands never blows enough air into the horn to produce an actual tone. The sound of the clicking is interesting enough all by itself, however, as the keys make a wide variety of sounds, and there is much rhythmic interest.

"Sax" strikes me as a brilliant idea, because it solves a problem which has been begging to be solved for a long time. For years I have been going to concerts and watching wind players, particularly flutists, try to make music by clicking keys. But it never really works. In a concert hall the key clicking is never loud enough

to be heard easily, and even when it sounds interesting, the listener is too far away to see how it is being done. Landry's videotape solves both the aural and visual problems quite simply and quite effectively.

"Six Vibrations for Agnes Martin" is a solo guitar piece. Landry picks out a kind of dissonant blues quite skilfully, and it sounds even more skilful than it is, because of a special reverberation technique employed. Meanwhile the camera is riveted on a close-up of four upper frets. We never see Landry or his hands, but only those six strings, which, of course, vibrate exactly with the music.

In "Hebe's Grande Bois" Landry plays a bamboo flute, and the camera locks into a tight shot of the performer's lips. The music, which again involves electronic reverberation, slides around eerily on very high tones. There is something quite sensual, almost obscene, about Landry's lips, which cover most of the screen, and they don't seem to add as much to the music visually as the hands and guitar strings do in the other tapes.

Landry, 35, has performed with the Philip Glass Ensemble since 1968, but his own music bears little resemblance to Glass's. His Louisiana roots as a jazz musician, and his facile tenor saxophone technique were far more evident than any possible Glass influence in his performance at the Kitchen Sunday night. This short concert consisted of one continuous 45-minute improvisa-

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tion, unaccompanied and unamplified.

Landry began with a series of lyrical phrases, outlining an unusual mode which became the home base for the entire performance. From here he took numerous excursions into those wild areas of the tenor saxophone which many jazz-based musicians have discovered, but which are still uncharted as far as the orchestration textbooks are concerned. He was loose enough to go off into the more raucous and squealy

registers of his instrument, and yet controlled enough to remember to come back to home base once in a while, and give a sense of unity to his playing. He got along fine without the usual support of bass and drums.

Landry does not seem as at home in the recording studio as he was in his live concert or in his videotapes. I heard a two-record set called "Solos" and an earlier album of film music, and none of the music really seems to belong on a disc. Many of the bands sound like mere fragments of some music which started long before and ended long after. I kept

wishing I could have been there when the recordings were made.

Another reason why this music doesn't work particularly well in recording is that its main value is the virtuosity of the players. And if there is one thing which always works better in live performance than in recording, it is virtuoso playing. That's true of Horowitz or Eric Clapton, and it's true of Landry and his ensemble. When one watches live performers do some difficult thing, one becomes involved, and is easily impressed. But recordings put a lot of distance between virtuoso and listener. Meanwhile, the techniques

which often make recordings work better than live performances don't play much of a role in Landry's albums: fancy mixes, electronic effects, stereophonic spatial effects, etc.

These are jazz-based performers, and in general their music resembles that of quite a few free-form improvising ensembles I have heard. One cut does seem unique, however. It's a five-minute number called "Requiem for Some," in which several horn players play mostly sustained tones, creating dissonant harmonies, while the bass and drums maintain a frenzied beat. □