

MUSIC REVIEW

Far-Flung Jam Session: Medium Is the Massage

By BERNARD HOLLAND

The distance between the maker of music and the music itself has always existed. It takes a certain amount of traveling for a finger, a foot or a set of lungs to produce a sound. Pianos have complicated levers that must be negotiated one by one; air must pass through tubes and valves to give a trumpet life.

So the Electronic Cafe International at the Kitchen late Saturday night was nothing new; it simply upped the distance ante by many times. In this three-city hook-up along the information highway, the Kitchen on West 19th Street, the Electronic Cafe in Santa Monica, Calif., and Studio X in Santa Fe, N.M., created sight and sound that whipped back and forth across this country's various rocks, rills and purple majesties.

David Rosenboom's "Is Art Is," for example, was a bicoastal piano duet. Mr. Rosenboom performed his part in Santa Monica, but the music whizzed cross-country at the speed of light and emerged from the Disklavier next to the one J. B. Floyd was playing in New York. In an excerpt from Morton Subotnik's "Angel Concerto," the composer in Manhattan manipulated piano sound with sensors held in his hand and placed on

one foot, the music emerging from instruments across the land.

Steina Vasulka playing a computerized violin in Santa Fe set off responses in sound and image that carried to television screens at both ends of the country. In a bigger ensemble featuring Leo Smith's New York-based trumpet, a far-flung jam session added to the pot.

A certain amount of technological throat-clearing was needed to get the evening going as the many parties and machines labored to come together in perfect agreement. Given the state of the art, which is young, it was probably an impressive achievement, even though the sound was awful and usually too loud, the television transmissions jerky and the visual images from Santa Fe reduced to grainy black-and-white stills projected moments after they were taken.

Yet technology dominated. Music had a chance, but not much of one. The listener and watcher felt a delegate to some instrument-maker's convention, or perhaps a visitor to an industrial fair for engineers. The composers made their music heard, but music clearly was secondary to these proceedings. The sounds existed to prove that the sounds could be made. Their quality didn't seem to make much difference.