

THE SAN FRANCISCO TAPE MUSIC CENTER

- A REPORT -

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When the San Franciaco Tape Music Center was founded in 1961, neither of the two composers who founded it had thought much beyond their own immediate needs for a studio for the production of sounds by electronic means and for a concert hall in which to present programs of an experimental nature, the sort that might not readily fit into the concerts of already existing musical organizations. Looking back over the past three years, it now seems possible to see the emergence of a specific direction that has come out of the experiences of these years rather than out of any predetermined concept of where the Center was ultimately heading.

Throughout this period we have remained independent of any university or college connection, and retained a balance in our relation to the community between our activities as a cultural agency on the one hand and a sound-recording studio on the other. Behind this balance has been the feeling that it should be possible for the composer to live from his work; that the solution to the composer's place in our society does not lie in having to choose between writing within the accepted 'avant-garde' traditions for performances aimed at some sort of musical in-group, or 'going commercial'.

We have felt that somewhere there should be a place where the composer can find brought together all the necessities of his art in an atmosphere conducive to his developing his own personal utterance free from the pull and tug of stylistic schools.

and from the competitive scramble that typifies much of the musical activity of today. In the race to make a 'name', to win the right fellowships and awards, the young artist is drawn into a way of living that is completely opposed to the basic values of the art itself. We have often thought that this personality-centering syndrome (as much the fault of the public as the artist) might be countered by presenting works anonymously, as contributions to the field of music, thus focusing attention on the work itself and not on who produced it.

Somewhere there should be a place where the fragmented elements of our musical life could be melted together and recast through the reestablishment of the artist's dialogue with his community in a new and vital way. A place where a new music would find a dynamic and vital expression for our own era, and by its vitality not countenancing the isolative practices of the cliques and factions that sicken the musical life of today.

There is a growing awareness on the part of young composers all over the country that they are not going to find the answers they are looking for in the analysis and composition seminars of the academies. Some retreat from the 'avant-garde' music environment, live marginally on the fringe of the community or attempt to work isolated from the musicians and concert groups. They have insulated themselves by this isolation from the sickness of the culture, but too often also from their own creative potential. Others have banded together and have produced concerts of their works outside of the usual organizations. The struggle of these groups for survival, and their high mortality rate, creates

a situation in which it can be regarded as miraculous if the participants manage to avoid the pitfalls of destructive reactionism or sensationalism. On our 1964 summer tour of the Midwest, I often felt that we were expected to perform amusing antics during the concert, and that some in the audience were disappointed in not witnessing some sort of scandalous behaviour on our part. 'Avant-garde' is coming to mean a comedy act, and unfortunately, composers are so eager for some sort of real contact with an audience that many set out to provoke at least the response of laughter.

In order to find the answer to these problems it will mean more than just demanding that composers turn to satisfying the needs of their audience. Nothing will be solved by turning out a proletarian music in the fashion of the Soviets. First of all there must come about the recognition that until the composers' needs are met there can be no hope of somehow breaking through the encysted layers of action-reaction-action, the oscillation of meaningless trends away from meaningless established practices.

Society must recognize its dependence upon, and need for, a truly communicative experience. It must be willing to do more than wait for the talented individual who somehow has survived the struggle and remained intact enough as a person to produce some valuable work. The 'cream-skimming' theory - that the talented few always float to the top - is just not true.

I would like to see the Center become a community-sponsored composers guild, which would offer the young composer a place to work, to perform, to come into contact with others in his field, all away from an institutional environment. Each composer would, through his contact with the Center, be encouraged to fulfill his own musical needs and develop his own personal language. He would have the advantage and support of all the facilities of the Center, for rehearsals and performances of his music, for

contact with other composers and musicians, for work in the electronic music studios. He would be encouraged to involve himself in the musical life of the community-at-large. The community in turn would be offered the services of the Center as a music-producing agency for films, for plays, for churches and schools. Such a program, carried through in detail, could produce a revolution. It would, I believe, in five years time, create a new cultural environment in at least our local area. Working closely with musicians organizations and cultural and civic groups, it could begin to break up some of the stagnant areas of our own local cultural environment, such as the traditional repertory of the symphony and opera, the pork-barrel city band, the entrenched conservatism of some of the chamber music organizations.

None of this can happen unless others want it to happen aside from those of us directly involved with living these problems. And ideally this support should come primarily from the local community, and secondarily from either the federal government or foundations.

We are all aware of the power of communications over the lives of a people. Direct control of communications media is a necessity for the dictator. The arts are communicative mediums also, and in totalitarian systems they too are subject to rigorous controls. The totalitarian governments are in actual fact much more realistic than ours, in that they recognize the power inherent in communication through an artform and control it accordingly. In the United States we are slowly beginning to

move away from the notion of art as amusement, and to realize that a painting or a piece of music is much more than a 'mood-setter', - that it contains the potential for a deep and moving human experience.

The San Francisco Tape Music Center up until now has served basically the two functions outlined in the first paragraph. But in fulfilling these functions it has become the focal point in the city for experimental events in the arts, with the primary emphasis on music, film and dance. This coming together of artists has been an important part of the experience here. Out of this coming together there have been made many important discoveries in performance procedures. A concert at the Center often contains a multiplicity of elements, both visual and aural, and can be guaranteed to be a very different experience from a concert in the usual sense of the word.

The other important function of the Center has been in its making available sound-producing and recording equipment to composers. This year the participating composers will number over 12, with the majority of them coming from universities and colleges in the Bay Area. The experience of working with electronically produced sounds and tape recorders is a very meaningful one for the composer. It used to be said that every composer must confront Arnold Schoenberg's *Method of Composing with Twelve Tones* and come to some sort of working agreement with it. Today ~~the~~ composer cannot afford to ignore the experience of working with tape. It is apt to deal many of his preconceptions a serious blow. I know of no composer

whose music has ever been the same after he has once worked with tape, and in all cases the effect has been a freeing one. Suddenly he has the choice of writing the piece for live performers or for tape, a choice not available to him before, and he finds himself viewing the whole concept of performance from a new vantage point.

One of the most exciting aspects of the work at the Center has been the combining of visual effects with both live performance and tape. A work such as Morton Subotnick's Mandolin; A Theatre Piece combines live viola, recorded voice and piano, recorded electronic and concrete sounds, slide projections and View-graph projections into a total experience of overwhelming beauty. Improvised pieces using live performers, tape, and light projections also have proved to be a moving experience both for the participants and for the audience. Desert Ambulance, a work of my own, combines recorded instrumental sounds, live accordion, slides and film. It also showed the efficacy of combining new visual elements with more traditional concert procedures. As one of the local critics said after the performance of Mandolin and Desert Ambulance just before we took them on tour, there seems to be a new art form in the process of being born.

This year, in cooperation with another contemporary music group, we will begin the bringing together of a library of scores and tapes of Bay Area composers to serve as an information service for persons interested in knowing about what is going on in the area musically. We also hope to expand the library into one which will contain new music from all over the world, so that local composers and musicians can keep informed about what is happening elsewhere. Later we will acquire equipment for the reproduction

of scores, so that new works can be copied and mailed to performing groups all over the world. Copywriting and royalties will be handled for the member composers, as well as other services of a similar nature. Thus little by little we hope to encompass the whole area of services necessary for the dissemination of new music, the protection and encouragement of the composer, and the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the production of original and valuable work.

About the electronic music studio: the studio seems to be evolving into three distinct production areas. The first, for the production of the sound material of the piece and the 'shaping' of it by the use of attack and decay control devices. The final sounds produced in this area are then recorded and the tapes are loaded on the sixty tape carriages of the playback control unit. By means of multiple channel recording and automatic selection of different segments of tape, up to 720 separate sounds can be stored in the unit. Once loaded, the unit can then be 'played' by the composer, thus combining the sounds in any order he desires. From this stage he takes his completed material to the third area, where the final editing and mixing is done. By separating the composing process into three distinct areas we will be able to accommodate up to three composers working at the same time.

A question we are often asked is "Where did you get the money for all this equipment?". What we have been able to build up until this point has been made possible through the careful use of whatever income was earned by the studio, through the



donation of equipment by interested companies, or, in some cases, by the long-term loan of certain items. The rest we have either been able to buy reasonably or have built for us by one of the three or four electronic engineers and technicians who have worked with us over the past three years. There are still many pieces of equipment which would be very useful but that we cannot afford at the present time. However we feel confident that before long we will be able to acquire whatever is necessary for the smooth operation of the studio. We also feel confident that many of the long-term goals set out in the preceding pages can be met, and that these coming years should prove an exciting adventure both for ourselves and for the community in which we live.