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MUSIC FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

The Center for Contemporary Music (CCM) at Mills College has been a major West coast source for experimental sound since its founding, as the San Francisco Tape Music Center in 1965. Like most avant-garde arts organizations, it has suffered a variety of low points, both in program and in the quality of work that it sponsors, during its twenty year history. Often, especially among producers of New Music or film, those qualitative lapses have to do with funding. The Amadeus version of the composer pouring forth his music, complete and without need for revisions, in need of only paper and pen to set down the notes, only exists on the movie screen. Composer-performers like those at CCM are engaged not only in producing the aural patterning that we call music, but also in searching out new sounds themselves, laboriously sifting through the noise of the late 20th century for meaningful sound experiences that will attract those of us who make it to the 21st, hence the title of last Saturday's concert at Mills, "Center for 21st Century Music".

Sound-making, when one uses computers and the synthetic array of instruments available today, is expensive. Mills College and the CCM staff are to be congratulated on what has been accomplished with limited funds. Confronting the stage before the concert was like wandering into a combination Goodwill fire sale and a silicon valley trade fair: computer terminals and synthesizers competed for every available electrical outlet with mics, tables covered with odd objects (antlers, children's dolls, etc.) sat next to enough music stands for a chamber orchestra, and assorted furniture filled any left over gaps, all crowding the stage so completely that performers seemed to have been forgotten. The range of equipment and the extraordinary works presented were indications of the current success of the Center. In fact, a sort of Renaissance seems to be underway.

Over the last few years, the CCM has been breaking down boundaries. Film, video, and performance artists have joined the faculty, and the technical staff of the Center have, rightly, begun to be seen not as simply support personnel, but as artist-composers and collaborators with their faculty peers. The first result of this new democratization was last Saturday's concert, the first to include both staff and faculty works. David Heintz, a filmmaker who divides his teaching between Mills and the College of Arts and Crafts, opened the evening with a low key situation/monolog about T.V. watching; or, rather, Everyperson's place in the information world. Heintz utilizes delays and feedback in such an offhand fashion that the audience is lulled into the illusion that this is just the way that the man speaks, a

somewhat weary workperson addressing himself, ironically, to the busy electronic field that forms our invisible environment.

The works that followed Heintz's opener were individually dense and, collectively, impossible to deal with here, in anything approaching the equity that they deserve. Scot Gresham-Lancaster, technical director at CCM, premiered "8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1", a series of collaborative vignettes, based on the predetermined interaction of instruments and performers dealing with integer diminution of varying sorts. William Winant, who teaches percussion at Mills, was, to put it simply, incredible in this work; as he was also in CCM Coordinator-Director David Rosenboom's "Zones of Influence", which closed the concert. "White Night", by Maggi Payne, was a delicate digital delay-collage of the spoken names of various artists, the sort of internal dialogue experienced on a sleepless night and, perhaps, owing something in technique to the early film/sound experiments of Paul Sharits and Tony Conrad.

"Three, Four: Knock on the Door", for two saxophones and percussion, memorialized the swing era; according to the program notes by composer, technical assistant Richard Povall, it bids "...a (mostly) fond farewell to those bygone days of phase music....you were so easy to write and so anxious to please...." Political themes followed in two works by Rosenboom, "Chilean Drought" and "Musical Intervention I". The former is a set of three variations for piano, percussion, and voice. Which one of the variations is performed depends upon the brain wave measurements, Alpha, Beta, or Theta bands, from the subject for the evening, in this case composer/tech.asst. Larry Polansky. "Musical Intervention I" is based on the militarized, march arrangement of Chile's national anthem that the Junta introduced after the anti-Allende coup. Rosenboom "demilitarizes" the work electronically into a gentle play of what sound like calliope phrases played underwater, while retaining the immediately recognizable melody of the original, to both chide the dictators who rewrote it and to memorialize the pre-Junta aspirations of the Allende government.

Larry Polansky's "V'leem'shol/...and to rule" is the first completed work of a series based upon cantillation melodies, "...the primitive melodic tropes of the shabbat morning Torah melodies." The computer software for the piece was written in a CCM version of FORTH (a computer language), designed by Polansky and Rosenboom. The introductory section, for voice, computer, guitar, trombone, and keyboards, is magisterial and opaque, in the sense that the music assumes a very physical presence, one that allows for almost no interpretive activity by the listener. Abruptly, we are transposed to an ethereal opposing movement for live and recorded flute, performed by Ann LaBerge. The computer transformations of the original, simple melodies here manages to retain the emotional impact of the cantoral forms, while introducing a condensation of the timing of each "voice" that

progressively diverges each from its entry relationship to the verses of the Torah. The result is a rich and complex fabric of sound that promises much for the future works in the series.

If this is to be the musical accompaniment to the new century, then our artistic future looks brighter than I had thought. The concert presented a series of vigorous, challenging and engaging works that never condescended to the audience's own capacities to act as co-creators, as active participant-listeners. If the students of the Center are as powerful as their faculty and staff, the graduate recitals that follow in April will be excellent.