

Studies in Glittering Acoustics

By Hewell Tircuit

Computer music is different. And yet, when you get right down to basics, it is the same as any other kind — sometimes good, sometimes poor and occasionally terrific.

This concept is what came across Monday for the large audience in Veterans' Auditorium. There, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players turned their program over to the elite forefront of modern music. Seven composers from Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) presented their studies in glittering acoustics.

Paul Wieneke's "Attend" began the display, followed by Andy Moor's terse "Perfect Days" and "Lions Are Growing." Then came John Chowning's "Phone," Jonathan Berger's "To the Lost History of Hope," Michael McNabb's "Love in the Asylum," Chris Chafe's "Solera" and the premiere of Bill Schottstardt's "Colony."

Such a list suggests a marathon evening, but no. The longest piece (McNabb's) took only 15 minutes. Moor's two pieces required only five minutes total. It was a concert of quite normal length and quite uncommon variety.

Anything having to do with computers — electronic music in general, for that matter — automatically promotes feelings of apprehension among the general public. Not to worry. If anything, the humanistic aspect of the CCRMA

group so dominated the evening that it approached botanical levels.

Several of the works employ the human voice, regular instruments (flute, most notably) and pictorial effects (surf) as materials.

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Many of the computer-produced sounds suggested folk instruments: prayer bells, gamelan-pitched percussion, water gongs. Others nearly aped bird songs, only taken at something like authentic speed and pitch — high, and very fast.

As crazed as this will sound to anyone who was not there, the program offered a quite pleasant experience. No one was blasted out of his seat by the four-track tapes. On the contrary, played on such excellent equipment, the titillation of tintinnabulation often achieved exceptional levels of sensuality.

Many of the pieces resembled embellished chorals. In these, thick blocks of sound would move slowly, while irregular figures of thin textures whirled about them. The major exceptions were those pieces based on poetry, such as Moor's settings from Richard Brautigan, and McNabb's three-movement son-

ic picture from Dylan Thomas' poem.

Indeed, McNabb's highly imaginative juxtaposition of recognizable materials, tonal images and pure computer sonics proved to be the evening's great hit. This was not so much *because* of the references to tradition, as in spite of them. What one experienced was McNabb's keenly artistic levels of taste and proportion.

Porportion also dominated Wieneke's "Attend" — a moving work with an uncanny ability to convey exact placement. One knew where one was in this piece. Wieneke provided a clear feeling for his beginning, middle and ending. That can be a hard achievement in even the most traditional music. Within an electronic medium, that amounts to a kind of hole-in-one.

The other work of great appeal was Chafe's "Solera," an ominous piece, a thing of ritual implication. For extreme contrast, Moor's rather giddy humor reached a conclusion as the narrator said, "Thank you," answered by a ghost chorus of, "Thank you," and then a flat "Thank you" by the narrator.

Other works suffered from rambling form or heavy genuflections to establishment trends. Chowning's "Phone," the most complex of the program, leaned too heavily on the Ligeti style and, further, lacked a feeling of direction. "Colony," on the other hand, was merely the obligatory drone piece again. (Thank you. "Thank you?" Thank you, no.)