The Hub

Musica Telephonica

BY KYLE GANN

As though the aesthetic distance between composer and audience weren't great enough, technology is now increasing the *physical* distance. Texas composer Jerry Hunt performs his music in far-away cities via telephone cables. Pauline Oliveros bounces hers off the moon, whence it can be picked up "live" in any location. A chilling scenario emerges:

Composer (in bathrobe and slippers): "Hey Mildred, keep the phone line open, will ya? As soon as *Dynasty*'s over I'm giving a concert in Cleveland."

But this development harbors an even more world-shaking corollary: someday anyone with a modem can have the same experience of a concert as the people who are actually there. I mean, a critic could listen to a performance computer-transmitted through the stereo system in his beachfront home in Oahu, write the review (preferably via brain-wave sensors wired directly to a dictionary file), and modem it 4000 miles away to the *Voice* that night, without leaving the comfort of his Naugahyde recliner! Ahhhh, the possibilities.

All the more commendable, then, that the six composers of a unique musical think tank called the Hub—Chris Brown, Scot Gresham-Lancaster, Phil Stone, John Bischoff, Tim Perkis, and Mark Trayle—actually showed up for their June 6 and 7 performances, rather than transmit from their San Francisco homes. The first three musicians played at the Clocktower, the latter three at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. The idea of performing in two spaces at once, linked by modem, came from EIF's Phill Niblock, that soft-spoken master of people-linkage; next he wants to arrange simultaneous concerts city-to-city and coast-to-coast. But the Hub had long ago developed the technology to make the idea work; their "hub" is a circuit box that combines information from six computers into a communal memory bank.

The Hub's composers downplay technology in favor of musical concerns, but during Gresham-Lancaster's *Vague Notions of Lost Textures* they allowed us to walk around, observe their computer screen messages, and assuage our curiosity. One got a feeling of being on the *Starship Enterprise*: "Scot: I just brought in the third voice." "Tim: We're not really gelled yet." "Chris: We should slow it down Scot." Other notations were more cryptic ("Chris: bubbly"), but they provided insights into the compositional decision-making process for which one used to have to go to the composer's sketches. Equally peculiar (for those who attended a different space each night) was the oblique correspondence of identical pieces between the Clocktower and EIF, for the two audiences did not hear the same sounds. Each group fed information into the others' performance, but basic materials differed, making each piece a kind of sonic conceptual butterfly: same body, wildly different wings. *Vague Notions*, for example, was a crescendo of loudness and density in both versions, but Bischoff's crowd realized it in tough, gritty tones, while Brown and company's were dronelike and more silvery.

For the listener the excitement lay in
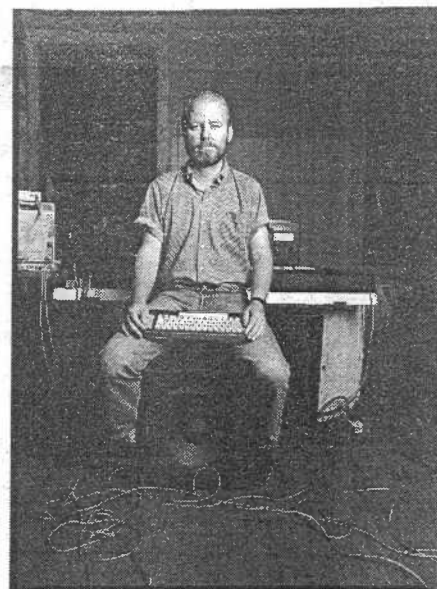
Man (John Bischoff) and machine

the reemergence in these performances of *music as process*: the original province of minimalism, long since abandoned. Unlike written or tape music, details of sound and contour were not always perceptually important, and unlike normal improvisation, one could rarely hear a player's individual contribution (an exception was Phil Stone, who "drew" sounds on a graphic screen to our delight). In giving up control of the music to group decisions, the Hub created a sonic entity larger than the sum of its members' ideas, truly a music with its

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own life. Relevant listening required zeroing in on the *logical process* (not a physical one, as in early Steve Reich), the structural skeleton embedded in the software that formed the piece's curiously flexible identity.

In this respect, I found most followable Phil Stone's *Is It Borrowing or Stealing?*, a jumbled variation on six melodies at once, each made by a different player and deposited in the memory bank. (The title referred both to each player's lack of control over "his" melody and to software ownership in general.) It was gratifying to track certain lines as they became louder, slower, brighter, noisier, in a bouncy, formally haywire sextuple fugue. The process of Trayle's *Simple Degradation* was less transparent, but at EIF it created a stream of voluptuous plucked-string sounds, underlaid by drones. (At the Clocktower on the 7th a minor equipment failure prevented their version from blossoming.)

The nonlinked trio improvs that occupied the second half of each program tended to be a little more polished, since everyone heard the results of their own operations. Brown/Gresham-Lancaster/Stone's *Food Chain* made ironic use of commercial software to create a minimalism uncharacteristically rich in rhythm and texture, while their *Local Echos* modified acoustic information so complexly that a whistle or shout was enough to trigger a chaos of sound. In *Vini* Bischoff/Perkis/Trayle used old-fashioned tape-music sounds with '80s restraint, and their *Sentimental* wove a filigree of noise within a thick chordal band.

Were I the type to place bets on history, I could see the Hub as the beginning of a very important movement. That some of the pieces weren't terribly refined is unimportant; in 1956 I'd have said the same about Boulez's *Structures* and Stockhausen's *Zeitmasze*. The Hub has not made their software commercially available, but given its adaptability other collaborative artists are bound to be seduced. It's rare for such ontologically singular music to be so generalizable to an infinite range of personalities and concerns. Though it refers to the machine, the Hub is propitiously named, for the performance practice that radiates from this musical center is likely to be extensive indeed. ∎

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