reviews:

records

ELECTRONIC MUSIC FROM YORK
Three Record Set, Nos. YES 2-4
(Price £5, from Richard Orton, Department of Music, University of York)

The task of reviewing a set of records devoted to electronic music is not an easy prospect, for one is faced with a system of artistic communication which requires an appreciation not only of the composition processes involved but also the effects of the use of technology in achieving the sonological result. It is particularly important to appreciate that the rôle of the latter is not entirely passive, except perhaps where the selected processes transform a set of musical procedures directly into an acoustic form. Invariably the characteristics of the studio devices themselves and the technical procedures adopted in their use influence the workings of the composer, and account for the occurrence of certain similarities between works of a group of composers working at the same electronic music studio. An appraisal of the set of three records of electronic music issued by the University of York Electronic Music Studio thus involves some general observations as well as specific references to the works of individual composers.

One technical point is common to the whole set. In the review copy all the records are prone not only to varying degrees of surface noise from time to time, but also give the impression that a consistent slight filtering out of the treble response has been applied throughout with a resultant dampening effect on the range and character of the timbres produced.

Another feature which is applicable to several of the works is a more musical one: the need to achieve a meaningful relationship between texture and structure in order that the whole composition is shaped by a coherent form. It is not sufficient merely to create textures of an instantaneous sonological interest, for events must be coherently related both to the preceding and succeeding material. This not only involves the simpler relationships effected by transformation and repetition, but also the need for an overriding structure or group of structures concerned with harmonic and rhythmic areas. In electronic music the problems of regulating the time scale of events is particularly acute, and it is no easy task to construct pieces which occupy only a small time span. Several of the works in the York collection are relatively brief, and some do not succeed completely in overcoming this problem. Moan by Andrew Bentley, for example, makes economical use of feedback principles applied to narrow band filters employed to generate an area of subtle, gently twisting timbres. The result, however,

is not so much a piece but more an extract suitable, perhaps, as material for a larger scale work. Dionysus by John Cardale also gives a similar impression of being slightly unbalanced. The piece is concerned with the use of superimposed patterns created from electronic oscillators which are treated to processes of transformation and montage. The restricted time span, however, results in what would seem to be a move from area 'A' to an area 'B', rather than a balanced overall structure.

Compression Ices '72 by Martin Gellhorn which, as the title suggests, was first heard at the International Carnival of Experimental Sound in London in 1972, is altogether more successful. The source material, created from synthesized sounds which have been subjected to tape feedback loops, is highly suitable for a faster-moving event/time scale, and the piece succeeds in the space of only 4'10" in establishing and manipulating several areas of sound in a manner slightly reminiscent of Hymnen by Stockhausen, and at one point Poème Electronique by Varèse, with the carefully controlled use of distorted sounds. Light Black by Richard Pickett is based on a structure of gently shifting harmonies, creating a variety of interweaving textures which achieve a high degree of coherence within its short span.

The three pieces by Richard Orton, Kiss, For the Time Being and Clock Farm, display the maturity of a composer who has been fortunate to have enjoyed close contact with the use of electronics for many years. Kiss dates from the early period of the York Studio when only a modest range of equipment was available. The use of the human lips and breath as sound sources captured with the aid of contact and air microphones is remarkable for the variety of textures which are effected through transformation, ranging from light bubbling effects not unlike those to be found in Pousseur's Scambi to labyrinthed, slowly changing tone complexes suspended in the middle distance. The contrast of depth here with 'foreground' effects highlights a curious reluctance by some of the other composers to explore the possibilities of subharmonics and other lower frequency textures in their works. For the Time Being employs sounds generated from selected items of domestic equipment encapsulated by a 'frame' of electronic sounds. The relationship developed between electronic and naturally generated sounds in this arch-form creates a unified structure within which elements grow and unite in a seemingly timeless sphere. Clock Farm is a fascinating exploitation of the regular patterns of ticking clocks subjected to simple treatments such as filtering, change of speed and the judicious use of reverberation, subsequently collaged to produce interactive patterns. Again the use of depth as well as separation as a major parameter enhances the use of events in space, and the perhaps inevitable use of a clock alarm elevates a cliché to an acceptable final 'downbeat'. The piece was originally conceived as an audio-visual work employing three slide projectors as well as a tape.

Media Music by Martin Wesley-Smith is a more substantial work created around sounds which are otherwise unwanted by-products of everyday communication, such as telephone bells, mechanical noises from tape recorders and carrier whistles from television sets. The wide variety of sound material is structured into areas of sound complexes interrelated through their inbuilt associations with the process of existence within a technological society.

Machine by Trevor Wishart is a veritable 'tour de force', stretching to three complete sides of the record set. In the composer's own words the work "is a first attempt to integrate musical, documentary and radiophonic approaches to the organisation of sound on tape" centred around facets of the world of automation, including not only sounds of machines themselves but also spoken observations on the subject of machines. The intention is to present not so much a piece but a conception built up from a structure of sound blocks each containing aspects of another, thus providing a system of interrelationships. The result, however, is unsettlingly static, for the various textures oscillate around a central area with no clear sense of movement to or from complementary or contrasting perspectives. The lack of distinctive 'downbeats' (except perhaps halfway through the second side where a continuous noise texture gives way to rhythmic imitations of machines by a group of singers) generates a through-composition which is rather repetitive. It is true to say that repetition is the primary feature of mechanical operations; this aspect, however, requires careful handling if it is to form the basis of a musical composition (compare the simple and effective structures of Orton's Clock Farm), and the Wishart piece through its inward looking structure is not entirely successful. Mention should also be made of the considerable distortion associated with many of the spoken quotations, particularly when this involves a group of participants. This form of treatment is one which requires careful handling, for as it is used here the effect is to deaden the information content of the source material.

The York collection at its best presents a fascinating insight into facets of modern electronic composition and makes a valuable contribution to the language of electronic music. The occasional difficulties in communication serve, however, as a reminder to all that, even after 25 years or so, musicians and technologists still have much to discover about the effective use of the medium.

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