REPORT ON BIRMINGHAM ARTS LAB MUSIC (SEPTEMBER 1977)

MELVYN POORE

For some time now, Arts Lab Music has presented a regular series of high quality contemporary music events and a music workshop in conjunction with the Extramural Department of the University of Birmingham. In August of this year, Birmingham Arts Laboratory opened the doors of its new premises in Holt Street and, with the appointment of Jan Steele as my part-time assistant, the activities of the music department will hopefully be considerably increased. A second music workshop has now been initiated, catering for a sector of the musical public not so far attracted to the Arts Lab: those interested in jazz, rock and improvised music. A joint Extramural/Workers Educational Asso-ciation class entitled 'World Music' commenced in Sep-tember and will run for two terms, and our usual Autumn-Spring Extramural Experimental Music Workshop will this year feature Tim Souster at a special weekend in the New Year. (I wonder how long it will be before we are able to offer a Diploma in Contemporary Music?) Depending on the result of grant applications, Arts Lab Music hopes to set up a more substantial sound workshop than we have at present, possibly providing facilities for making film soundtracks as well as normal tape work. Our music publishing scheme is about to be launched; this has links with our chamber ensemble ANOMALY, which is in the fortunate position of being able to commission two new works during this year.

All these activities make great demands on the time of the music staff and on the music budget (our rate of growth cannot be contained within one year's budget, however loosely structured), so we decided late in 1976 (when grant applications for this financial year were drawn up) to discontinue the concert series that was a feature of Arts Lab Music up to March 1977; our final presentation was 'An Evening with Henri Pousseur' as part of the Arts Today Festival.[1] Ending the series was not an easy decision, since I doubted whether Arts Lab Music could survive for long

without the stimulus of incoming musics; but it was intended to be only a temporary cutback to allow the department to consolidate its facilities in the new premises and to tempt new blood into our activities by permitting a freer financial rein to the workshop, which has in the past lost much potential experimental activity through lack of resources. In spite of this decision, however, we are planning to promote a series of jazz/rock/folk concerts in our new bar when it is completed at the beginning of November and we shall have had two or three concerts of contemporary music in the new cinema before Christmas.[2] Whatever changes of policy we do make, we shall always want to promote new music, and it is apparent now that even the most temporary cessation of concerts is not good for the Lab either internally or externally.

Our most immediate and exciting project is the publication of new music. The broad aim of this scheme is to help composers to gain recognition and performances of their works by making available cheap but well-designed and well-printed scores for international distribution. All scores will be produced at the Lab in consultation with the composers. The scheme will be jointly administered by Arts Lab Music and the Arts Lab Press and is being launched with four scores in the category 'Music for Brass Instruments': Lyell Cresswell, *Drones IV* (1977) for tuba and tape; Simon Emmerson, *Variations for tuba* (1976); Richard Orton, *Ambience* (1975) for bass trombone and tape; Melvyn Poore, *Vox Superius* (1976) for solo tuba. I make no apology for the predominance of tuba music in the first issue, for two reasons: one, it is badly needed; two, as Music Director of the Lab, I like to rely on my strengths rather than my weaknesses. I know where the markets lie for brass music and in this way I can help to give the infant scheme a healthy start. Future publications will include scores for ensembles, many of which will, we hope, pass into the repertoire of ANOMALY (also a growing concern and now consequently sometimes known as ANOMALY PLUS). Composers in all fields of contemporary music activities, including music education, are invited to submit scores for consideration.[3] Scores will be read by a panel of three, chosen from team members from different musical backgrounds. These publications will be available to libraries and individuals alike on an annual subscription basis at reduced rates.[4]

The Experimental Music Workshop, organised again this year by the Extramural Department of the University of Birmingham and supported by the Midlands Arts Centre and the Arts Lab, will take the form of an historical survey and some practical instruction in electronic music. I shall be taking the class through the painfully long processes involved in making electronic music in the early studios to give an insight into the particular works we shall study and, with the help of an acoustics lecturer from the Department of Physics, into the nature of sound itself. Tim Souster will spend a weekend demonstrating the voltage-controlled synthesizer and live electronics. The remainder of the course will comprise follow-up sessions to the weekend and an introduction to computer sound synthesis. (We are installing a MUSIC V programme at the University of Birmingham.)

The move to Holt Street brings the Arts Lab into an extraordinary and potentially dangerous situation; Aston Centre for the Arts has existed on the site for some years and attempts to cater for the students ofAston University (Birmingham's second university, entirely separate from the University of Birmingham at Edgbaston) and the general public. It lacks, however, a clear overall artistic direction, mainly because of its excessively bureaucratic infrastructure. The Arts Lab, on the other hand, is a very committed group of artists and sympathetic administrators who have a very distinct idea of what they are doing and why. The spectre of the University of Aston looms large over the comparatively small organisation of the Arts Lab, particularly because of Aston's financial commitment to the project; but the presence of the Lab now enables Aston to boast the largest on-campus arts complex in the country, including a Regional Film Theatre. All this in a science university! Unfortunately, the University of Aston is not at all interested in the contemporary arts, but only in prestige. It has been particularly unco-operative, territorial and bureaucratic in its attitude to finding a new home for Arts Lab Music: even a temporary housing. As a result of this, the music department is in danger of remaining where it is at the present time: in the front room of my house. We are awaiting decisions on grant applications from Housing the Arts and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: if both are positive in their reactions we may find ourselves with a small but brand new recording studio. The land on which this would be built belongs, of course, to the University of Aston, and its plans for the use of its property appear to alter every week.

All parties concerned with the new arts complex expressed their desire for co-operation in programming, use of performance areas and technical facilities. Up to now Arts Lab Music has seen little of it. Whether or not co-operation will be achieved, given the vastly different ideologies and policies of the two organisations, remains to be seen, but we certainly hope that the hard work of the last three years will culminate in the only real reason for the Lab's existence: some worthwhile artistic results.

NOTES:

[1] For a review of this see *Contact 17* (Summer 1977), p.42. (Ed.)

[2] Anyone writing for concerts please contact Jan Steele, Music Assistant, Birmingham Arts Laboratory, Holt Street, Birmingham, B7 4BA.

[3] Scores should be addressed with a covering letter to Melvyn Poore at the above address.

[4] For details of the subscription scheme write to The Publications Manager, Arts Lab Press, 11 Gosta Green, Birmingham, B4 7ER.