THE BRITISH ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC MUSIC ASSOCIATION

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A new association has been launched to promote and develop electro-acoustic music in Brtain. The term 'electro-acoustic' covers all acoustic phenomena requiring an electronic component, thus embracing all the old terms 'electronic music', 'musique concrete', 'tape music', 'live electronic music', etc. Membership of BEAMA will be open both to studios and individuals as well as industrial and media interests and will, we hope, become the umbrella organisation for a whole range of services for composers, performers, promoters, educational authorities, commissioning bodies, industry, etc.

To sketch the short history of this idea: last summer I was invited by the Arts Council of Great Britain to organise the agenda for a one-day meeting of studio directors. The preliminary stage involved the collection of details about each studio — equipment, finance, availability to composers. (A summary of this is to be made available to composers through the Arts Council and BEAMA to enable them to contact studios most appropriate to their needs.) Results of the questionnaire revealed the expected weaknesses all too clearly — a vicious circle of lack of interest, experience and finance. Yet the meeting of October 31 revealed that there was considerably more activity than many had realised and that the development of a performance tradition and more open programmes allowing composers much more studio experience were feasible and realistic aims even within the apparent limitations of the financial climate. This was perhaps the first occasion at which so many studio organisers had got together: this alone was a substantial step.

Those present at this meeting — which inevitably attempted to cover four or more areas, each of which alone could have occupied a weekend — immediately advised that such a survey be extended to many non-university studios and that future gatherings include representatives from industry and the media. By some stroke of luck (or Zeitgeist!) Richard Orton had already planned a weekend for studio users in York and readily offered the booking to the Arts Council for a continuation of the discussion. So from March 31 to April 3, 1978 an expanded group, involving also composers and Arts Lab directors, met in York at the invitation of the Arts Council. Between the two meetings the twin ideas of BEAMA and a Centre for Electro-Acoustic Music (possibly in London) had been developed and formed the basis around which other topics revolved.

It is perhaps not so remarkable that the one issue upon which musicians from a wide variety of backgrounds can agree is that of performance: yet the degree of unanimity of purpose which was felt throughout the two-day meeting was nonetheless striking. Working groups were formed to advise on specific services for the Association. The establishment of a performance centre would be a major undertaking involving the raising of capital and income for a substantial period. Comparison with IRCAM is inevitable but misleading. The Paris group are concentrating on composition research (admittedly with an advanced performing space) while plans for the British centre (at present in their first stages) envisage a more exclusive concentration on performance and communication. The Centre might furnish equipment for performances anywhere in the country and thus not act as an unnecessary drain on regional developments. Such an ideal centre would house social facilities — eating, drinking and meeting places — and research libraries; there would possibly also be a small production unit for scores, tapes and discs for public sale.

Another working group will try to establish common standards of tape presentation and playback equipment which will enable networks of tape exchange to be more reliably organised. Already a directory of suitable spaces on the one hand and suitable equipment owners on the other is being drawn up. The Association will try to bring the two together to promote regular low-cost (yet carefully prepared) concerts. Box office criteria and audience figures will therefore be of little importance, enabling a large number of tape programmes (if and when suitable works become available) to be circulated throughout the country. Trevor Wishart has planned a Northern Contemporary Music Network series of tape (with slide) concerts for January 1979 which is the model for some aspects of the larger venture.

Yet another working group is drawing up a catalogue of electro-acoustic works, possibly to be housed at the British Music Information Centre. From this the Association could produce promotional literature which will hopefully stimulate much greater interest amond promoters, radio producers and others to sponsor, commission and broadcast such work.

Having broken down the feeling of isolation to a great extent throughout these two meetings, the establishment of a newsletter, perhaps at some later stage developing into a journal, is an obvious priority. Discussions of technical standards, aesthetics, news of research, details of new works, bursaries, commissions, etc. could already furnish material for several issues.

BEAMA must from the start be an organisation open to all interested groups: there is no doubt that the domination of university studios can now give way to a more common programme in which networks of facilities, from schools and colleges, adult education centres, arts centres and galleries can involve far larger number of people. I have written in general terms: in the near future the formulation and publication of some of these plans will be seen. The enthusiasm we found generated at these two meetings can now lead into sustained long-term action in this neglected area of British music.

Anyone who is interested in BEAMA and would like further information, or who has any views or ideas to contribute is invited to contact Simon Emmerson at 71 Ladbroke Grove, London W11 (tel. 01-221 4085) or at the Music Department, The City University, St John Street, London EC1 (tel. 01-253 4399).