EXTENDING THE STUFF MUSIC IS MADE OF

BY MORTON SUBOTNICK

■ It is fairly well established that the long-expected "common language" of the twentieth century has not been achieved. Each composer today individualizes his style, even changes that "style" radically from one composition to another. If he adheres to a common language, it applies only to the group he has accepted (and has been accepted by), and the group itself tends to remain in stylistic and aesthetic contrast to other groups.

The twentieth-century composer is directly challenged—whether or not he accepts the challenge—by the historically accepted masters of his art. His intense awareness of their styles and techniques as part of the musical fiber of the society he lives in—an awareness unprecedented in previous centuries—compels him to adopt new positions. He must also be aware of the discrepancy between the nature of his developing musical language (with its highly individualized form and content) and the traditional institutions this music functions within.

The fractionated nature of twentieth-century music has invalidated the concert hall as an effective institution for its presentation. An audience, before it can understand a new composition, must have time to adjust to the language of the

The author is Master Artist in Intermedia, School of the Arts, New York University, New York City. During 1968-1969, he is Visiting Professor of Music, University of Maryland, College Park.

particular style, whether it be a group or individual style. The fact that there is so much music to be played (both past and present) and such a vast audience to reach, limits the number of times an audience can be exposed to new works. In such a situation, an audience has no opportunity to absorb the complexity of content in a new composition. Also, since the conductor knows that the audience is unfamiliar with the work he is presenting, he tends to devote too little time for its effective presentation. A few conductors are exceptions, and the gradual enlargement of this group is starting to change the dismal landscape a bit.

Luckily, the concert hall is not the only available institution. The recording industry has the potential to satisfy the needs of twentieth-century music far better than the concert hall, even if the concert hall suddenly reformed. Generally, the extra time spent in preparation for a recording, and the editing done after taping, means that, more and more, recorded performances are at least accurate if not inspired. The record can be listened-to over and over again and can economically reach more people with greater ease and without having to accommodate an audience with mixed taste. It is my opinion that the recording, although it lacks the spontaneity of live performance, satisfies so many of the joint needs and desires of the audience and composer that it is as close to an ideal medium for new music as the parlor was for chamber music. The consequences of the record becoming the primary medium for twentieth-century music are not altogether pleasant, but I have come to accept the drawbacks as well as the advantages and have for some time made no attempt to deal with the concert hall as an institution.

The need to create something to be performed spontaneously and witnessed "live" has led me to experiment in the development of a new presentational institution—mixed-media. Earlier, I thought "music theater" to be a more valid title: the requirements become clearly defined when mixed-media becomes in this context essentially "theatrical" and exclusively presentational. It takes many forms and is obviously different in the hands of different artists. It differs from other theatrical or dramatic forms, like ballet or opera, in that the content, whether it be the movement of lights or the movement of a body or the movement of a violin bow, is always directly interrelated with the abstract content of the musical experience (or of the basic experience related to the particular discipline of the artist, as in the case of a painter who produces a mixed-media composition). The "theatrical" is merely a visual extension of the stuff that music is made of. The content is not easily defined, although most composers come to it with similar motivations and problems. It is not easily defined because the musical experience is not easily defined. Some compositions tend so much toward the dramatic that when the visual extensions are added, it takes a form not much different from dance and sometimes opera or film. I have attempted to keep my presentational music theater compositions close to the abstract experience that motivates my musical thinking. I have also recently begun to deal with the possibility of mixed-media chamber music to be performed in a small room (a living room for instance) without an audience or, if there is an audience, with the kind of audience that would be present when string quartets are playing in someone's home.

Descriptions of two related works follow to help the reader get a feel for the content of mixed-media presentations. The first is by the painter-light artist Anthony Martin, with whom I have collaborated in mixed-media presentations for the last six years, and the second, a mixed-media "chamber music" composition, is my own.

THE GAME ROOM

Free time, free access space approximately 20′ by 20′, where one to eight people may enter and take positions on the game board floor to activate the visual environment in specific ways. The participants or players, after learning from a random process of activating distinct energies, may then choose particular themes and try to manipulate the total mechanism in their desired direction by interacting with the other players. The themes are indicated by colored lights on a central, ceiling-hung sculpture, which divides the room into four parts. By using a center patch board, they can change the themes that are possible in each of the four areas. No images will happen until a person places himself in the particular area; therefore a miniature society is created through their manipulation of the center module and their position on the game board floor. Each group of players at any point in time will then produce its own particular combination of images and consequently its unique total visual environment.

RITUAL ELECTRONIC CHAMBER MUSIC

Cast: Four players, one "High Priestess," and four channels of electronic sound.

Setup: Four lucite rods associated with four electronic game boards located in four corners of the room. Over each is an audio speaker. In the center of the room is the high priestess with one lucite rod and light bulb attached to her costume.

Mechanism: Four channels of tape are played continuously for the duration of the piece. The various buttons on the game boards control the choice of: (a) channels on the tape, (b) the amplitude envelope of what is to be heard, and (c) one of the four projections.

Procedure: The piece begins when one of the four players makes a move by pressing one of the lighted buttons on his game board. This choice could for instance produce the projections of an arm of the high priestess on the screen located between the players, or it could produce a short burst of sound from one of the four channels. His choice will immediately set up the possibility of choices for one or more of the other game players whose choices will produce, again, short, medium, or long bursts from one of the channels or a projection on one of the four screens. The high priestess moves the sound in the room producing a spatial score, plays the lights on her body and related lights throughout the room. For instance, when she places the sound above one player, his lucite rod will blink off and on according to the location of the sound in the room.