

Community Arts

Vol. 2, No. 9, October, 1980

Center for Music Experiment

by William Justin

The Center for Music Experiment at the University of California, San Diego sits in a former Marine camp bowling alley. The squat, brown building, CME as it's often called, is home to some of today's most exciting and innovative musical activities, and is a main reason San Diego has become one of the world's leading sites for New Music.

Inside CME, where the drab military interior has been crisply restyled with grey carpet, white walls, and a natural wood ceiling, there are ideas and instruments guaranteed to upset anyone whose concept of music is stuck to the chiefly Germanic works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A computer is being taught to make music. The range and capabilities of the human voice are being dramatically extended. Cognitive psychologists and other scientists work with musicians to develop new sounds, new techniques, and the forms in which composers can use them.

Filling one end of CME are all manner of gongs, rods, boxes, and strange-looking percussion devices, intermingled with wires, amplifiers, tape recorders, and several long black corrugated tubes. The guts of a piano stands exposed in an upright frame; a boomerang-shaped platform is mounted with various sizes of inverted stainless steel bowls. There is a ceremonial presence to all this strange equipment which may be reflected in the name of the group that plays it. KIVA, an experimental arts ensemble formed in 1975, is called after the meeting and ceremony site of the American Pueblo Indians.

Among KIVA's members—which also include a dancer, trombone player, and flutist—is Jean-Charles Francois, a French-trained percussionist who played throughout Europe and Australia before coming to San Diego. Since 1979, he has been director of CME. Through KIVA, Francois is exploring ways to create music without notation—not so much by improvisation but rather by designing new sounds from which a repertoire can naturally evolve. In order to learn more about non-written communication, Francois has gathered musicians, linguists, poets, visual artists, and dramatists into a UCSD "Orality Group."

KIVA's concern with sound is typical of the multiple styles called New Music, whose roots extend to the breakdown of romanticism and the social and economic upheavals at the beginning of the twentieth century. Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg in Europe, Charles Ives and later John Cage in America, started to compose music that turned away from traditional emphasis on tonality, rhythm, and organization, and began to examine sonority—the quality of sound itself. Music written before these changes was of but a few styles and could be played equally well on almost any instrument. Twentieth century compositions began to require specific sound sources to be heard. The emphasis on sonic material was carried by a second generation of composers, the likes of Webern, Berg, Brittan, Cowell, and Krenek, who, beyond a common commitment to sound, varied greatly in their own aesthetic approaches.

The development of new styles and ideas hit a lull during the Depression and Second World War. By 1950, postwar change had disrupted standard musical thinking and there was a virtual explosion of ideas by artists who often used new technology like the tape recorder and other electronic devices developed for the war effort. Names like Stockhausen, Subotnik, and Babbit began to appear. Many San Diego composers are, roughly speaking, from this era.

But much of this excitement never reached the public's ears. Even as new styles began to proliferate at the start of the twentieth century, the world of the music maker, the composer, and the music promoted started to drift apart. Orchestra management seemed to take on the function of a museum—preserving the past—and became increasingly conservative; so did musical educators. Contemporary music was rarely played, or studied.

Not everyone was happy with this turn of events. Certainly not Roger Reynolds, currently UCSD's music department chairman. When he went to the University of Michigan to get a music degree he realized people were only playing the music of remote times and remote societies. He began to sense dissatisfaction: nobody was playing contemporary music. The feeling grew until he took a composition course, and started to write his own contemporary pieces. He is presently writing a piece for computer processed human voice and live vocalist. Reynolds is also known for pieces exploring the spatial possibilities of sounds. This interest led him to music utilizing scientific techniques and modern technology. In 1972, he founded the Center for Music Experiment, and in 1977, a CME conference convinced him computers could be practical musical instruments. He obtained grants for UCSD to acquire what is expected will be the world's finest computer music-making facility.

The Computer Audio Research Laboratory, CARL for short, is in the back of CME. The computer itself, a Digital "VAX" state-of-the-art machine, was delivered to its air conditioned room last summer. It is already singing to itself. Soon, its voice, a pair of digital-analog converters, will be installed so it can start making crystal-clear quadrasonic sound. Eventually, CARL's staff will build a special device to allow the computer to be actually played live in concert, to interact in real time with a performer on stage.



Jonathan Glasier and Fender 4-Neck

CARL will be a facility with unprecedented power and flexibility, capable of generating any sound the mind can imagine and a loudspeaker can produce. It will be able to choreograph trails of sound movement between four speakers, and will also be a special research tool for analyzing sound. The project is being supervised by composer Richard Moore along with Gareth Loy, both of whom studied at Stanford University's pioneering computer music facility.

The idea of a center for New Music at UCSD goes back to the inception of the school's music department in 1966. Composer Will Ogdon, the department's founding chairman, recalls a meeting the first time he came to the campus where he heard a plan to create centers for various artistic disciplines. Ogdon added a suggestion which was to become CME, none of the others have materialized. Ogdon was also part of the curious chain of events leading UCSD to become a pioneering New Music advocate. Administrators had planned to emphasize musicology and music history at the campus, but when they realized campus libraries did not have sufficient holdings for a music scholarship program, they turned to composers (who didn't need the books), and it was primarily the mental attitude of composers that shaped the department. The extraordinarily large proportion of composers at UCSD guaranteed attention to the New Music they were writing. The variety of musical styles represented by the faculty owes itself to a conscious decision to avoid hiring similar people but to build on differences between composers. Ogdon himself studied with Ernst Krenek, and tries to create a more simple, more direct sense of Schoenberg's aesthetics. Robert Erickson also studied under Krenek, but his work investigates the sonic and technical possibilities of instruments. He has worked with aerospace engineers to create new, unusual instruments.

Pauline Oliveros has worked with electronics, but also uses the unadorned voice in rich, organic sonic meditation pieces. Bernard Rands has been greatly influenced by Luciano Berio, with whom he studied. Rands also conducts SONOR, a twentieth-century performance ensemble known throughout California and the West. Most of SONOR's instrumentalists and vocalists are on the department's performance faculty. Virtuosos like bassist Bertram Turetzky, trumpeter Edwin Hawkins, and vocalist Carol Plantamura were recruited because they liked the challenge of playing New Music, which is often much more difficult to perform than the classics.

There was another important force shaping the San Diego musical community, a maverick composer and instrument builder named Harry Partch. Dissatisfied with the twelve-tone system of Western music, Partch invented his own scales of microtones and built an extraordinary collection of instruments on which to play them. The instruments are large and stately, with names like the Boo, the Mbira Bass Dyad, the Zymo-Xyl, and the Marimba Eroica. Partch moved to San Diego and had been in contact with UCSD since 1964. In 1969, he formally taught a music class there. It was the first and last time he taught a class. When he died in 1974, Partch left his instruments and his legacy to Danlee Mitchell, professor of music at San Diego State University. Mitchell holds annual performances on Partch's instruments in San Diego.

While in San Diego, Partch sometimes stayed with violist John Glasier,

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New Music

Arthur Frick's instrument the pik hummer.

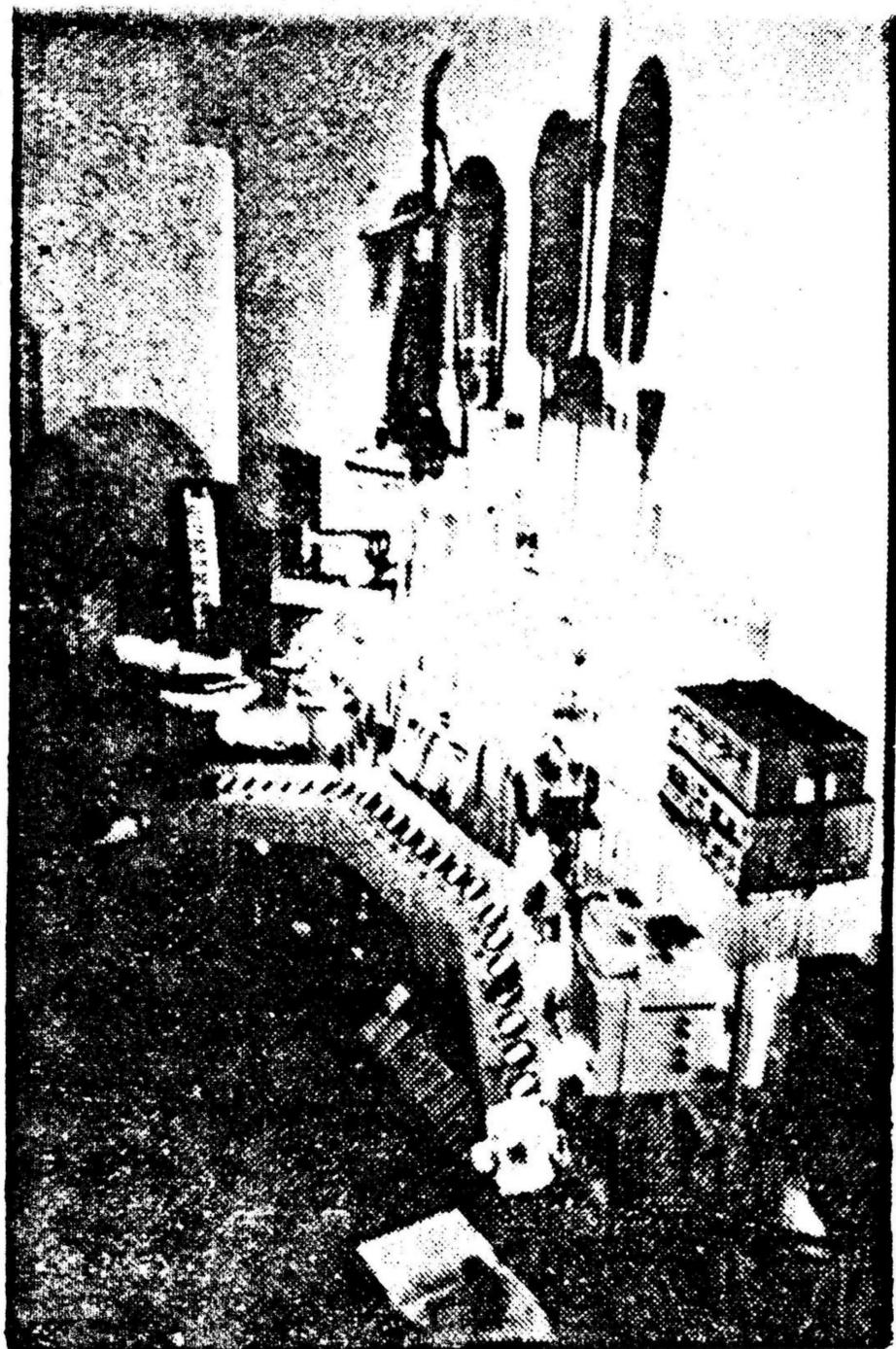


Photo by Brad Dow

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whose son Jonathan would receive a music degree from UCSD and construct one of Partch's bass marimbas for the school's undergraduate music program. Jonathan Glasier is involved with Catalyst, and heads the Interval Foundation which publishes a magazine for the lively community of new instrument builders in San Diego. The Foundation also co-sponsors a new instrument exhibition and festival with CME, and has its own studio downtown, where every Friday they present a "Dance Jam" of recorded and improvised music.

New Music composers being an eclectic bunch, they often use non-Western traditional music as a resource for sounds and ideas. When SDSU music department chairman Bob Brown arrived from Berkeley, he brought with him the Center for World Music, an independent, non-profit organization that has established a cooperative relationship with SDSU, and presents concert and teaching programs in music and dance from all over the world. The Center puts on a monthly concert series throughout the year, and a six week concert/teaching program during the summer. Music from India, Indonesia, the Philipines, Spain, Brazil, and the Congo is presented, as well as Early European music and pieces by Harry Partch. Meanwhile, at both SDSU and UCSD, courses are taught on the music and techniques of the Gamelan, a special collection of instruments found, with some variation, in both Java and Bali. The Javanese Gamelan calls for a fifteen-person ensemble. UCSD has a Gamelan teacher from Java, and usually presents one performance a quarter.

Besides UCSD, SDSU, and the instrument builders, there are others in San Diego who are involved with New Music. Kenneth Gaburo, formerly at UCSD, is a composer and performer who also runs a publishing house for work in the arts and humanities. He has published poetry, literature and