

MUSIC

Tape Music Center

Electronic Sound Pioneers Reunite for Retrospective



From left: Anthony Martin, producer William Maginnis, Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick and Pauline Oliveros in 1964

BY JOSHUA KOSMAN

CHRONICLE STAFF CRITIC

ELECTRONIC MUSIC may seem like a commonplace phenomenon today, with composers happily generating computerized sounds or using electronic processes to alter the sounds they've got. The proliferation of personal computers, synthesizers and MIDI interfaces has put the technology within anybody's reach, and blasé attitudes can't be far behind.

It wasn't always so. In the 1950s and '60s, electronic music seemed like a brave new world, offering composers not only scrupulous control over musical performance, but also a chance to integrate music with other performing arts in new ways.

ONE OF the seminal hotbeds of experimentation in the mid-'60s was a loosely organized collective called the San Francisco Tape Music Center. For a brief but fertile period, the center became a gathering place for composers, performers and visual artists interested in pursuing new possibilities in technology and multimedia performance.

Tomorrow evening, the Victoria Theater will be the site of a reunion concert; bringing together many of the artists and composers who contributed to that flurry of activity. Presented by the Theater Guild of San Francisco, the concert will feature music dating from

1963-66 by Morton Subotnick, Pauline Oliveros, Ramon Sender and Steve Reich, and films by Robert Nelson and Bruce Bailey. Composer Gordon Mumma and visual artist Anthony Martin also will participate.

Over the years the center was operating, such composers as John Cage, David Tudor, Terry Riley and La Monte Young took part in its activities. Donald Buchla developed the Buchla 100, one of the first electronic synthesizers, for the center; that machine still works, and will be used in the concert).

In 1966, the center moved to Mills College in Oakland; it later became the Center for Contemporary Music, which remains open.

As Sender recalls it, the center began in 1961 with a rudimentary electronic studio that he put together in an attic as part of his senior project at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. With the help of Oliveros, Riley and Italian composer Luciano Berio, who had just begun teaching at Mills, Sender gave six concerts that year; the music involved both electronic tapes and live improvisations.

Unable to get financial support from the conservatory, Sender went to Subotnick and said, "You've got a garage full of records; I've got an attic full. Let's get them together."

The fledgling center was in an abandoned house scheduled to be torn down on Jones Street. The first concerts were held in the living room, with space for about 75 people. From the first, the center was a home not just for electronic music, but for multimedia performances

and interdisciplinary undertakings of all kinds. "We had the San Francisco Mime Troupe come in, as well as numerous poets — Robert Duncan produced his Halloween Masque there," Sender recalls.

"The upstairs of the house filled up with oddball painters. We tried to keep it just a work space, but people kept showing up and moving in."

The Tape Music Center also was host to some of the first instances of that staple of '60s counterculture, the "happening," Sender says. "We did something called 'Cityscape,' where we loaded everyone in the back of two trucks and cruised all over town. The entire city became a theater stage.

"After the happening, someone remarked that the only way to top this was to burn the place down. We had already rented our new place, at 321 Divisadero, and that day I had replaced a fuse in the fuse box. Well, the next thing I knew, there was a red glow and the attic was in flames. So in the end we did burn the place down.

"A lot of our regular subscribers showed up to watch. They assumed it was our final event."

IN THE new location, the center expanded its musical and theatrical activities to include a visual component as well. "I realized that an audience is used to something visual at a concert — watching the orchestra or whatever — and that with a tape piece by itself, it's dull just to hear sounds coming out of two speakers. So we started to develop visual scores for our pieces."

Tomorrow's retrospective concert was organized by San Francisco composer Randall Packer as the first in a series of programs devoted to music theater and other kinds of multimedia performance. "The Tape Music Center was such an integral part of music history in the Bay Area," he says. "For all the innovations of the '60s, the works themselves are not that well-known. Many of the people who are doing interdisciplinary things today are using techniques that grew out of the center, but most of them don't even know it. So we thought this would be a good place to start."

THE center's founding figures long since have parted, but all of them will be returning to San Francisco for this gathering (Oliveros has been acting as composer-in-residence at the Exploratorium during October, where she will speak about her music today at 2 p.m.), and the force of nostalgia is beginning to set in. "The more we discussed the plans for the program," Sender says with a grin, "the more it began to seem like just another Tape Music Center concert."

The San Francisco Tape Music Center Retrospective, 1963-66, will take place at 8:30 p.m. tomorrow at the Victoria Theater, 2961 16th Street.