

The San Francisco Tape Music Center— A Report, 1964

RAMON SENDER

When the San Francisco Tape Music Center was founded in 1961, neither of the two composers who founded it had thought much beyond the immediate need for a studio for the production of sounds by electronic means and for a concert hall in which to present programs of an experimental nature, the sort that might not readily fit into the concerts of already existing musical organizations. Looking back over the past three years, it now seems possible to see the emergence of a specific direction that has come out of the experiences of these years rather than out of any pre-determined concept of where the center was ultimately heading.

Throughout this period we have remained independent of any university or college connection, and retained a balance in our relation to the community between our activities as a cultural agency on the one hand and a sound-recording studio on the other. Behind this balance has been the feeling that it should be possible for the composer to live from his work; that the solution to the composer's place in our society does not lie in having to choose between writing within the accepted "avant-garde" traditions for performances aimed at some sort of musical in-group, or "going commercial."

We have felt that somewhere there should be a place where the composer can find brought together all the necessities of his art in an atmosphere conducive to his developing his own personal utterance free from the pull and the tug of stylistic schools and from the competitive scramble that typifies much of the musical activity of today. In the race to make a "name," to win the right fellowships and awards, the young artist is drawn into a way of living that is completely opposed to the basic values of the art itself. We have often thought that this personality-centering syndrome (as much the fault of the public as the artist) might be countered by presenting works anonymously, as contributions to the field of music, thus focusing attention on the work itself and not on who produced it.

Somewhere there should be a place where the fragmented elements of our musical life could be melted together and recast through the reestablishment of the artist's dialogue with his community in a new and vital way. A place where a new music would find a dynamic and vital expression for our own era, and by its own vitality not countenancing the isolative practices of the cliques and factions that sicken the musical life of today.

There is growing awareness on the part of the young composers all over the country that they are not going to find the answers they are looking for in the analysis and composition seminars of the academies. Some retreat from the "avant-garde" music environment, live marginally on the fringe of the community, or attempt to work isolated from the musicians and concert groups. They have insulated themselves by this isolation from the sickness of the culture, but too often also from their own creative potential. Others have banded together and have produced concerts of their own works outside the usual organizations. The struggle of these groups for survival, and their high mortality rate, creates a situation in which it can be regarded as miraculous if the participants manage to avoid the pitfalls of destructive reactionism or sensationalism. On our 1964 summer tour in the Midwest, I often felt we were expected to perform amusing antics during concerts, and that some in the audience were disappointed in not witnessing some sort of scandalous behavior on our part. "Avant-garde" is coming to mean a comedy act, and unfortunately, composers are so eager for some sort of real contact with an audience that many set out to provoke at least the response of laughter.

To find the answer to these problems will require more than just demanding that composers turn to satisfying the needs of their audience. Nothing will be solved by turning out proletarian music in the fashion of the Soviets. First of all there must come about the recognition that until the composers' needs are met there can be no hope of somehow breaking through the encysted layer of action-reaction-action, the oscillation of meaningless trends away from meaningless established practices.

Society must recognize its dependence upon, and need for, a truly communicative experience. It must be willing to do more than wait for the talented individual who somehow has survived the struggle and remained intact enough as a person to produce some valuable work. The "cream-skimming" theory—that the talented few always float to the top—just is not true.

I would like to see the center become a community-sponsored composers' guild, which would offer the young composer a place to work, to perform, to come into contact with others in his field, all away from the institutional environment. Each composer would, through his contact with the center, be encouraged to fulfill his

own musical needs and to develop his own personal language. He would have the advantage and support of all facilities of the center, for rehearsals and performances of his music, for contact with other composers and musicians, for work in the electronic music studios. He would be encouraged to involve himself in the musical life of the community-at-large. The community in turn would be offered the services of the center as a music-producing agency for films, for plays, for churches, and for schools. Such a program, carried through in detail, could produce a revolution. It would, I believe, in five years' time, create a new cultural environment in at least our local area. Working closely with musicians' organizations and cultural civil groups, it could begin to break up some of the stagnation of our own local cultural environment, such as the traditional repertory of the symphony and opera, the pork-barrel city band, the entrenched conservatism of some of the chamber music organizations.

None of this can happen unless others want it to happen aside from those directly involved in living these problems. And ideally, this support should come primarily from the local community, and secondarily from either the federal government or foundations.

We are all aware of the power of communications over the lives of a people. Direct control of communications media is a necessity for the dictator. The arts are communicative mediums also, and in totalitarian systems they too are subject to rigorous controls. The totalitarian governments are in actual fact much more realistic than ours, in that they recognize the power inherent in communication through an art form and control it accordingly. In the United States we are slowly beginning to move away from the notion of art as amusement, and to realize that a painting or a piece of music is much more than a "mood-setter"—that it contains the potential for a deep and moving human experience.

The San Francisco Tape Music Center up until now has served basically the two functions outlined in the first paragraph. But in fulfilling these functions it has become the focal point in the city for experimental events in the arts, with the primary emphasis on music, film, and dance. This coming together of artists has been an important part of the experience here. Out of this coming together there have been many important discoveries in performance procedures. A concert at the center often contains a multiplicity of elements, both visual and aural, and can be guaranteed to be a very different experience from a concert in the usual sense of the word.

The other important function of the center has been in its making available sound-producing and recording equipment to composers. This year the participating composers will number more than twelve, with the majority of them coming from universities and colleges in the Bay Area. The experience of working with electronically

produced sounds and tape recorders is a very meaningful one for the composer. It used to be said that every composer must confront Arnold Schoenberg's "Method of Composing with Twelve Tones" and come to some sort of working agreement with it. Today the composer cannot afford to ignore the experience of working with tape. It is apt to deal many of his preconceptions a serious blow. I know of no composer whose music has ever been the same after he has once worked with tape, and in all cases the effect has been a freeing one. Suddenly he has the choice of writing the piece for live performers or for tape, a choice not available to him before, and he finds himself viewing the whole concept of performance from a new vantage point.

One of the most exciting aspects of the work at the center has been the combining of visual effects with both live performance and tape. A work such as Morton Subotnick's *Mandolin: A Theater Piece* combines live viola, recorded voice, and piano, recorded electronic and concrete sounds, slide projections, and View-graph projections into a total experience of overwhelming beauty. Improvised pieces using live performers, tape, and light projections also have proved to be a moving experience both for the participants and for the audience. *Desert Ambulance*, a work of my own, combines recorded instrumental sounds, live accordion, slides, and film. It also showed the efficacy of combining new visual elements with more traditional concert procedures. As one of the local critics said after the performance of *Mandolin* and *Desert Ambulance*, just before we took them on tour, there seems to be a new art form in the process of being born.

This year, in cooperation with another contemporary music group, we will begin the bringing together of a library of scores and tapes of Bay Area composers to serve as an information service for persons interested in knowing about what is going on in the area musically. We also hope to expand the library into one which will contain new music from all over the world, so that local composers and musicians can keep informed about what is happening elsewhere. Later we will acquire equipment for the reproduction of scores, so that new works can be copied and mailed to performing groups all over the world. Copyrighting and royalties will be handled for member composers, as well as other services of a similar nature. Thus, little by little, we hope to encompass the whole area of services necessary for the dissemination of new music, the protection and encouragement of the composer, and the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the production of original and valuable work.

About the electronic music studio: the studio seems to be evolving into three distinct production areas. The first, for the production of the sound material of the piece and the "shaping" of it by the use of attack and decay control devices. The final sounds produced in this area are then recorded and the tapes are loaded on the sixty

tape carriages of the playback control unit. By means of multiple-channel recording and automatic selection of different segments of tape, up to 720 separate sounds can be stored in the unit. Once loaded, the unit can then be "played" by the composer, thus combining the sounds in any order he desires. From this stage he takes his completed material to the third area, where the final editing and mixing is done. By separating the composing process into three distinct areas we will be able to accommodate up to three composers working at the same time.

A question we are often asked is: "Where did you get the money for all this equipment?" What we have been able to build up until this point has been made possible through the careful use of whatever income was earned by the studio, through the donation of equipment by interested companies, or, in some cases, by the long-term loan of certain items. The rest we have been able to buy reasonably or have built for us by one of the three or four electronic engineers and technicians who have worked with us over the past three years. There are still many pieces of equipment, which would be very useful, but that we cannot afford at the present time. However, we feel confident that before long we will be able to acquire what is necessary for the smooth operation of the studio. We also feel confident that many of the long-term goals set out in the preceding pages can be met, and that these coming years should prove an exciting adventure both for ourselves and for the community in which we live.

An Overview of the Tape Music Center's Goals, Autumn 1964

RAMON SENDER

The San Francisco Tape Music Center is a nonprofit corporation developed and maintained by a group of composers and creatively oriented around engineers. The group is dedicated to the concept of promoting creative experiments in sound as music. It is founded on the firm belief that artists can and must extend their expressive vocabularies to include imaginative use of the materials of today. Furthermore, there must be an outlet for a healthy relationship between the products of these efforts and the ever-growing audience interested and involved in new modes of artistic expression. It is to these ends that the Tape Music Center was founded, exists, and is determined to continue.

The use of electronic devices as a tool for musical composition has become increasingly challenging to composers in all parts of the world. In response to the growing interest, electronic music studios have been established in many cities. Some European studios are under the auspices of electronics manufacturers such as Philips of the Netherlands and Siemens Verlag of Munich; others are operated by the European radio systems such as Radio Milan and Radio Cologne.

The largest and best-equipped studio in the United States is the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, which was founded under a Rockefeller Foundation grant. Other studios exist in this country, whether privately operated or under the auspices of a university.

The San Francisco Tape Music Center was founded in 1961 by composers Ramon Sender and Morton Subotnick in order to provide a studio for the production of electronic music in the Bay Area. At that time, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music provided the space and opportunity to gather together equipment in a temporary studio, thus centralizing the activities, which had previously gone on in the individual composers' homes.

The center gave a series of concerts under the title SONICS, at which not only local electronic tape works were performed, but also those from the already established studios in Europe and North America. Composers included Milton Babbitt, Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, Pauline Oliveros, Henri Pousseur, Terry Riley, Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick, James Tenney, Phil Winsor, and many others. The studio was modest; a lack of sound-generating equipment forced the group to search for new sound possibilities within everyday objects, somewhat similar to the methods and techniques used at the musique concrète studio in Paris. The use of the contact microphones on metal and other objects, and a piano soundboard for reverberation were the basic simple tools. The new sounds found their way into the improvisational compositions performed by composers on the same programs as the tape works.

The public and the press response to the SONICS series was encouraging, and those involved found themselves in a new relationship to the audience rather than the traditional concert hall situation. This stimulated new concepts in the performance procedures, and, by the end of the season, the improvisational compositions had become large collaborations between composers, painters, and dancers. Participants included members of the Dancers' Workshop company, painters Laurel Johnson and Anthony Martin, and composers Pauline Oliveros, Loren Rush, Philip Winsor, Morton Subotnick, and Ramon Sender.

In June of 1962 an offer from a friend of a large Victorian house was gratefully accepted as a temporary location. We also began to acquire equipment of a more sophisticated nature, including a six-speed, three-channel tape recorder, sine- and square-wave generators, and more adequate patching and mixing facilities. In September of the same year another series of concerts was initiated and continued throughout the winter. A number of local groups were invited to participate in the programs and to present events of an experimental nature. The intention was to further explore the potentials inherent in the newly formed concepts of production and performance techniques made evident by the previous season's experiences. Emphasis was placed upon the freedom of each group to realize these concepts within its own medium. The participants included the poets Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser, director Lee Breuer and company, painters Jess Collins and Robert LaVigne, and the R. G. Davis Mime Troupe.

The new series acquired a critical and enthusiastic audience whose active participation in the programs contributed greatly to the success of the series. The performances were more polished than those of the previous season, each group bringing

to itself and the audience a fuller realization of the potentials and limitations of what can now be called "theater compositions."

The interest was not only local. The Tape Music Center was invited to produce a program at the Vancouver Festival in February 1963. For this program Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick, and Robert LaVigne produced a theater composition entitled *Transformation*.

In March of 1963 the San Francisco Tape Music Center found a building that was ideally suited to its needs. Located at 321 Divisadero Street, near the geographical center of the city, the building contains two small halls downstairs, one seating about 100, the other about 50 persons, plus a soundproof control room and three other rooms. Upstairs there is large room sufficiently isolated from the rest to afford a good environment for the production studio proper. A three-year lease was signed in May, with a three-year option. The Tape Music Center in turn was interested in KPFA-FM and the Dancers' Workshop subleasing space and sharing in the joint venture of creating a place where a number of groups with common interests can come together.

For the 1963-1964 season, the center scheduled two series of four concerts each. Works presented on the first series (final concert February 1964) included *Synchronisms* for flute and tape by Mario Davidovsky, *Visages* by Luciano Berio, songs by John Cage and *Fontana Mix with Aria*, both sung by Cathy Berberian, *A Theater Piece after Sonnet No. 47 of Petrarch* by Morton Subotnick, and some electronic compositions from both this country and abroad. The second series will include performances by pianists Leonard Stein and David Tudor, and theater pieces by Pauline Oliveros and Ramon Sender as well as light and sound events by other local artists, and tapes from France and Poland. The second series will end in June, to be followed by a summer series.