

Recordings

When the Listener Is Composer

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By THEODORE STRONGIN

MAX NEUHAUS, in the program notes to his new album, *Electronics and Percussion*, poses some fundamental questions about chance music, even while emphasizing that he has "previously avoided the use of program notes."

Neuhaus, who appears on the album as percussionist, electronic instrument performer and "realizer," obviously feels that the music on his disk—by Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Sylvano Bussotti, Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage (Columbia stereo MS 7139)—speaks for itself. "I offer the notes in the hope that they may dispose of the questions and enable people simply to listen," he writes.

"I have always felt that the musical experience does not lie within the realm of technical questions such as:

"What is the type of notation used?

"How much of what happens during a concert is the composer's doing and how much is the performer's?

"Does the performer make his decisions before playing the piece, or does he allow them to come about during the performance?"

Neuhaus does not think people should use these questions "as a basic criterion for listening."

As to notation, the kind of music he "realizes" leaves many more and more obvious decisions to the performer than allowed by standard notation on the five-line staff. Chance music may be notated on a graph, a diagram, or perhaps by a drawing (often a beautiful one). No matter how unconventional the notation, it has nothing to do with the musical experience "realized" from it, Neuhaus is saying.

Nor does it matter that in Earle Brown's "Four Systems—For Four Amplified Cymbals" Neuhaus was the person who chose the cymbals, not Brown. Choice of instrument was left by Brown

to the performer. "Brown's score consists completely of horizontal lines of varying thicknesses and lengths," writes Neuhaus. The lines exist on different planes and they overlap.

"Rather than a strict interpretation of these patterns, during the [live] performance I allow my eye to pick out various combinations that seem interesting or relevant to that particular moment in the piece," Neuhaus writes.

So a good deal of what happens in "Four Systems" is Neuhaus's doing, and some of his decisions—such as the choice of cymbals—are made before playing and some during the performance.

All this adds up to the word "realize." Neuhaus is not just a performer. He has a larger role. He is a "realizer."

Where does this leave the listener? Is he hearing Brown's work or Neuhaus's, or a combination of both? Or is the listener expected to become a "realizer" too, in this kind of music, and choose to be aware of and make sense of only what he wishes or feels is relevant, just as Neuhaus did with Brown's horizontal lines?

I suspect that to get the most from the music on this disk, the listener is going to have to depend upon his own awarenesses, over and above what Brown and Neuhaus intend. Initially, it's difficult to divest the composer whose name is printed on the work of near-total responsibility for what is heard, assuming the performance to be expert enough (and Neuhaus's undoubtedly is; he's had wide experience with chance music).

But if the listener accepts the responsibility of being a "realizer" of Neuhaus's "realization" of Brown's and the others' scores, he may find strange things taking place. If he forgets about Mozart and Beethoven and about what music *ought* to be like, he will find fresh patterns and fresh associations form-

ing in his mind. They may or may not be interesting ones.

They may be frightening, as in Cage's "Fontana Mix" (Neuhaus calls his realization of Cage's score by the name "Feed." Contact microphones are rested on various percussion instruments standing in front of loudspeakers. Once the sound vibrations start, they are self-feeding, so to speak. Each sound causes the mikes to move around, creating more sounds and new relationships. Neuhaus controls their intensity by electronic means. They can get very, very intense. They become a searing, pealing shriek at times that feels as though it exists inside one's own head rather than out in the real world).

A review of this kind of music by definition cannot tell each listener what he himself is going to hear and feel in it. All I can describe are my own "realizations."

Brown's "Four Systems," for instance, reminded me of factory sounds with their edges softened, continuous but shifting in quality. Feldman's typically quiet "The King of Denmark" was a gentle landscape of soft, bell-like clangs, rather sad in effect. Bussotti's "Coeur Pour Batteur—Positively Yes" scratched, strummed and pinged slightly more continuously than Feldman's music, and it gave a sense of sound drifting in time, not controlled or directed. Stockhausen's "No. 9 Zyklus for One Percussionist" made a single varied palette out of a large number of instruments. Its effect was dry, active and trim.

All five works, when listened to with concentration, did heighten my awareness not only of the sounds they made but of surrounding sounds outside. A firecracker going off fit right in with Stockhausen, an airplane going by seemed to belong to the Cage. But these are only my own "realizations." To find out if the disk is worth hearing, the listener will have to provide his own.

RECORDING OF SPECIAL MERIT

MAX NEUHAUS: *Electronics and Percussion: Five Realizations*. Brown: *Four Systems—for Four Amplified Cymbals*. Feldman: *The King of Denmark*. Bussotti: *Coeur Pour Batterie—Positively Yet*. Stockhausen: *No. 9, Zyllus for One Percussionist*. Cage: *Fontana Mix—Feed*. Max Neuhaut (percussion). COLUMBIA © MS 7139 \$5.79.

Performance: Creative and superb
Recording: Excellent
Stereo Quality: Ditto

I have intentionally listed this fascinating disc under the name of the performer rather than under the names of any of the composers—gurus all of the post-war avant-garde—for, in every case but one, the decisions of what to hit and when are made entirely by the performer. Even in the Stockhausen, the qualified exception, the performer is offered a certain freedom of choice (the piece is circular and ends wherever it happens to begin) and has the opportunity to take even greater liberties—Neuhaus turns the score upside down and thus produces a “counter-clockwise” realization. In all cases the composers have supplied what the jazz and pop boys call a “chart”—graphic figures of one kind or another which may convey more or less specific information about what to play or may be open to a variety of interpretations. In the case of the Brown, Bussotti, and Cage works, all of which are worked up from relatively abstract “graphs,” Neuhaus has, on his own, extended the live sounds through electronics. The amplified cymbals in the Brown realization approach the quality of electronic white noise. The Cage, which uses charts originally prepared for a tape piece, is entirely made up of feedback produced by putting microphones on various percussion instruments in front of loudspeakers and riding gain on the various channels. The Bussotti realization amplifies vocal grunts and groans as well as sounds produced by Neuhaus’ body in motion! The Stockhausen and the Feldman are not electronic at all—except by virtue of their being recorded. This is of special significance (as Neuhaus remarks in his program notes), for Feldman’s soft sounds can be picked up and communicated through recording in ways that would not be possible in a hall. (The curious title is the composer’s tribute to the king who prevented the Nazis from deporting Danish Jews during World War II.)

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Neuhaus himself disdains questions of notation and authorship in favor of the reality of the musical experience itself and, of course, basically he is quite right. Nevertheless, why shouldn’t credit go where credit is due? Neuhaus makes of his Cage-in material a fascinating, disturbing experience somewhere on the very inside of electronic circuits; his Stockhausen is strong and varied, easily the best of many versions of this piece that I have heard. Feldman’s music is, as always, soft and delicate, but emerges here as

also subtle and elegant; in fact, somewhat surprisingly, this is the major overall effect of the record—not, as one might expect, mere power or *outré* sound. The record, produced by David Behrman, himself a composer of related persuasion, is an excellent example of the creative use of the medium.

An amusing footnote. Neuhaus appears on the jacket in living color, surrounded by his instruments, stripped to the waist and ready for action, his long-haired, bearded head surrounded by a shining halo of light—a veritable hirsute avant-garde guru himself. Alas, that head of hair is no more; it was shaved down to the bald skull during a public performance shortly after this recording was made. Nevertheless, I think these performances can still be rightfully called hairy!

E.S.