At the Composers' Symposium last week...

The Composers' Symposia are one of the lesser publicized musical events on campus. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons: the performances, aside from the aberrations (which are well propagandized and accepted by the "in" crowd) we have all come to expect, are excellent; and the works which are presented represent either in vogue or significant today. There is another very obvious, but no less important, reason: a visual artist may allow his works to hang for a month; however, in the case of a musician, once the air stops vibrating, the presentation is over. It is obvious, and all the more reason for attending these concerts; they offer what might be our only chance to hear some of these works. Furthermore, the standard of performance is usually excellent.

This concert presented the listener with the curious, if not absurd, question about the chronological categorization and-or evaluation of style on this basis; i.e. some of the works seemed almost anachronistic, others like rough copies of recent styles which are already waning in this accelerated culture, where fashions change with stupefying rapidity. Of course, this question of validity is limited, of necessity, to only a few facets—ones that were apropos in this case—of the complex phenomenon of aesthetic experience. If one adheres to esthetic theories which accept an evolutionary development, or if one simply holds that priority and originality are of consequence, these interests will strongly determine the appraisal of musical works. On the other hand, the whole matter is of little or no consequence if one accepts Leonard Meyer's thesis that we are in an extended period of stasis typified by a wide-ranged pluralism which occasionally gives us the impression of movement. The latter view would allow a concert-goer an admirable degree of objectivity, or tepid indifference; the person who holds ideas like the former must make judgements, and runs the risk of being so biased that he may distort his evaluations.

The first work, **Six Little Pieces for Two Violins**, by Dan Benton, ranks him as a member, albeit a latecomer, of the school of Webern, who, unfortunately, never really established one. These pieces were imitations, at times pleasant, at times heavy-handed and obvious of Webern's crystalline, condensed style. The effect was nostalgic, but with a bit too much lavender. The similarity was too strong, and forced me to mentally "red pencil" several hastily conceived moments which were clumsy. The piece had good features—e.g. the instrumental idiom was utilized with skill, and his use of pitches seemed, for the most part, well controlled—but I felt it should be reworked as rigorously as Webern would have done. It is, I admit, an unfair comparison, but one that is warranted by the admission. The performance by Messrs. Ohmes and Rouslin was sensitive and precise.

Then the house lights were dimmed to darkness, almost—this was probably the most dramatic feature of the piece that followed, **Siwell Reteep,** by M. Christopher. There were a few audible groans from people who knew that Peter Lewis heads the electronic music studio, and were offended by the blatant character of the retrograde anagram. True to the title, the piece itself used backward vocal utterances; in fact, in most respects the piece was backward. The most fitting thing was the dedication to Mr. Lewis, for the work was totally dependent upon technical artifices which he teaches. However, Mr. Lewis is not responsible for Mr. Christopher's trivial application of this techniques. I think the piece deserves no further comment.

I presume to insure some sort of continuity, only half the house was lighted, and on the darkened stage anonymous figures took their places. They immediately satisfied my curiously by enunciating their names, with certain unimaginative transformations, for the next ten minutes or so. For the first half of the work, for some reason, the syllables "can" (from Candace) and "ick" (from Patrick) were predominant. Perhaps it was selective listening on my part? As the work progressed, the transformations developed into distortions, but there was no increase in intensity—how could there be?? It was simply another one of Purswell's shoddy conceptions.

So far I had journeyed back to Webern, then to the "modern" tape techniques (which after only a few years sound more dated than a Bruckner symphony), and finally to some degenerated Dadaism. Now Mr. Christopher would take me back to the 'good old days' of German Expressionism—right here in Iowa City! The work (his **String Trio**), however, was too syncretic to qualify as true expressionism. The beginning sounded as though we were in for some simple plagiarism from Ligeti; but Mr. Christopher was much more generous with his borrowings. The debts to Berg, Schoenberg, and Hindemith were as disconcerting as the clusters and glissandi which always seemed to stumble in at the wrong times. The performers did a great deal to compensate for the composer's inadequacies.

Anyone who is not familiar with the techniques of electronic music should be informed that one of the easiest feats is to set up the synthesizer and sequencer to produce continuous, repetitive sound patterns; add a few tape loops, play in a few sounds, and you have an amateurish conglomeration that might pass as a work. Such pieces are being mass-produced across the country, and Ray Burkhardt's **Ausculation** (another clever title) is one more donation from the University of Iowa. The ideas were nonexistent or bland, and every technical device stuck out like Spiro Agnew at a Gay Lib Convention. The piece was far too long, and the puny ideas were merely put together with little, if any, regard for their interaction and the rhetoric of the piece. It was simplya potpourri of electronic manipulations. Fortunately, Mr. Burkhardt ran out of tape, and so the work came to an abrupt and abortive finale. The best part of the piece was a loud buzz (at the threshhold of pain) which helped me to clear the canal of my left ear.

Dan Benton's **Two by Two** for clarinet was a trip back to Darmstadt ca. 1960. The piece was demanding technically, but Mr. West's skill enabled him to play even the most difficult passages with finesse. The piece was expressive and quite delicate at times. It is sad that Mr. Benton felt it obligatory to include several contemporary (at that time) mannerisms, such as written in squeaks, flutter-tongues (which seldom work well on the clarinet), toneless blowing into the instrument, and so forth; these techniques detracted from, rather than added to, the effect of this work. Mr. West's artistry was such that I am sure many composers left the hall thinking about a work for clarinet.

Jonathan Albert's **Vliut** at first seemed like a dramatic lingual reading in Picenian, Bhotian, and Uzbek—then I realized it was another of those fashionable gabble pieces. Once again, chronological orientation was difficult. This stylish technique is already approaching senility. This was further complicated if the listener happened to be familiar with **Finnegans Wake** (which is much more lyrical). I suppose, if the work had been interesting there would have been no stimulus to think of all these things; but as it droned on, I began to think of the "Pree Verse" and the "parole in liberta" of the Italian Futurists; their concepts of new structural and syntactical features, as well as a much broader concept of onomatopoeia, etc., were formulated in the second decade of this century. As I thought about this, the surrealists, e.e. cummings and so forth, the young lady next to me was obviously thinking about Bach, because about the only had endured ten minutes of ululations and hackneyed histrionics, she said something unkind about Mr. Ablert's work and escaped. If the people of the audience who felt similarly had had this girl's guts, I think we would have an intermission at that point in the program. Technically, aside from the asinine attempts at acting out the text and the fake profundity produced by phonetic bafflegab, the most disturbing features were 1) the continuous use of a morendo effect, 2) a preponderance of downward glissandi, 3) a slow, boring tempo, 4) no respect for dynamic changes, 5) a disrespect for the beauty of silence, 6) a rather crass handling of devices such as stimmtausch—not necessarily in that order. The appealing aspects were mired down in all that. It made a better group therapy session than a work of "art." Despite all that, there was the usual amount of applause which appeared to be led by some exuberant fellow artist. This forced the realization upon me that eh only thing separating a clique from a claque is a clap.

James Sparling's **Canons in Memoriam: Igor Stravinsky** began auspiciously. It seemed powerful enough to pull the audience out of the listlessness careted by the previous work. Then, however, began a series of sections rather mechanically divided between soloists, strings, tutti, and percussion. The canons were heavy-handed, and reminded me of Stravinsky's memoriam to Dylan Thomas. Mr. Sparling should be reminded that Stravinsky, in dedicating the **Symphonies d' Instruments a Vent** to Debussy, saw no reason to imitate the impressionist style; and it would have been advisable for this composer to avoid Stravinsky's canonic technique. It also occurred to me that the date of Mr. Sparling's birth—1946—would have been a more suitable date for this composition. The percussion sections were one thing that Stravinsky, the master rhythmicist, would not have allowed. They were too puny in conception and too boisterous in presentation.

I left Harper Hall and the Composers' Symposium of April 7, with a mild case of historical vertigo, and with several questions in my mind; that was, perhaps, the most beneficial result of an otherwise mediocre concert.

—*Gene Pauls*