

# Nothing new about New Music

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**I** KNEW I shouldn't have arrived early for the Center for New Music's Saturday evening performance in Clapp Recital Hall. The woman to my left, I realized, was not calling out numbers at random, but counting backward at a snail's pace. And (God help us) she was only on 92.

This "Count-Down" from Kenneth Gaburo and the New Music Choral Ensemble, which began the performance with what the program called a "sensing (instruction) composition," should have started at 20 if it was meant in any way for the observer's perception. After a while, even the enumerators began to sound sluggish and bored.

And what happened when zero was reached? Some rumbling from the speakers introducing "Steel Worker's Blues" by Michael Farley, William Park and Electronic/Experimental Music Studios (EMS) members from 1982-1983. What should have been some exciting moments passed silently by instead as "Scratch" lumbered into public.

**QUEASY ABOUT** self-definition, Scratch's founders opted to pedantically "assume the following" about their creation: "It is research-based in that it INTERROGATES; experimental in that it TAKES CHANCES; compositional in that it MAKES; interactive in that the complexities of language — born of human endeavor — is its SINE QUA NON feature; and performance-oriented in that it sin-

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cerely recognizes the need for, and significance of, PARTICIPATING OBSERVERS. Scratch hopes to evolve and to change, as time, place, circumstance and necessity require."

I hope so, too.

The only bow to the "common man" or attempt at universality in "Steel Worker's Blues" was the title. From there, the piece rambled through a series of slides taken of EMS members, with taped beatish conversation about such topics as the "artist and how he relates to society," "expressing yourself" and "the politics of music" floating rapidly around. In the right channel was an occasional newsy, nuclear war-related item, apparently intended to tie the count-down into the show and add some token relevance. Enter Iowa's atomic cafe.

**ROBERT PAREDES'** two compositions which followed provided a minimalist breather from the thick media onslaught of "Steel Worker's Blues." The 1980 "Moving in Shadows" with Bill Wellwood on clarinet was a quiet piece exploring the tension of silence in a musical performance. "T(Here)" forced the audience away from the visual distractions of performance as flutist Jane Walker was positioned at the back of the auditorium. There were moments of hauntingly Japanese intervals and sounds, and the music was both

technically flawless and well-crafted.

The final "chance" taken on the program was the daring presentation of a 15-year-old composition by Herbert Bruen and Kenneth Gaburo which is not aging well — "Collaboration One (The Beauty of Irrelevant Music; Mutatis Mutandis)." These two pieces, superficially connected by the respective use of computer graphics and nature slides as "scores" and the overlay of the two "scores" at the end, seemed stale, considering the current use of computer-generated artwork in everything from pop music concerts to the tacky short used to open movies at the downtown theaters a couple of years ago. And even though the quality of the taped voices was supreme in "Mutatis Mutandis," the Nikolai Dance Company's "Sanctum" expressed the same things much better.

**GABURO'S BEATISH** "Irrelevant Music," with all the trappings and intonations of a student poetry reading, was the headiest part of the program, possibly verbalizing some of what "Steel Worker's Blues" labored over. The argument presented was that irrelevant music has unknown premises. That is, there is no known basis from which to argue about it or make conclusions; it knows no authority other than itself. It is not made "to sell," which would support an unfavorable system and allow the music to be influenced by popular demand.

The question raised: If contemporary art reflects contemporary life, why is experimental music un-

recognized as a significant 20th-century art form? The answer: Either the experimental music or the viewer is out of its time.

I applaud the straight reasoning, but I'm afraid I can't agree with the implied conclusion — indeed the dare — that one should step into the times and like this stuff. If people found the program "insular," as Gaburo put it in "Irrelevant Music," it might have been because pieces like "Irrelevant Music" and "Steel Worker's Blues" reeked of narcissism. The beats might have gone on about themselves, but there was a universality in their work that made it art. And they spoke as people, not "artists," breaking down the barriers, not building up a shroud of mysticism around creative activities.

**SURE, IF THE MUSIC** is "irrelevant," in Gaburo's words, there is no basis for criticism of it because it stands on no foundation of ideas about what makes good art or bad art. But since Scratch needs "participating observers" (a contradiction in terms, but let's say "audience") then that consideration, their "market" if you will, should and must influence their work and break open that comfortable solipsistic world of the artsy EMS.

If its intention is to present an intimidating barrage of stuff labeled "art" as a dare to the audience to see the emperor's clothes, Scratch will quickly go the way of the dinosaur. If not, let's hope the growing pains are brief.