

well-seasoned



PHILL NIBLOCK'S concert of tape music at the Kitchen on May 29 was not held at the Kitchen. Instead, everyone was transported to the composer's spacious loft on Centre Street, where wine was served and the atmosphere was very casual. Niblock is primarily a film-maker, and most of his tapes are conceived more as sound tracks than as concert pieces. Since there are no live performers, and since the tapes are not really intended to entertain an audience all by themselves, it could have been tiresome to listen to the music in a formal concert situation. But in an atmosphere like this it was quite enjoyable.

The evening began with an untitled electronic piece which consists of periodic grumbling sounds. It is in stereo, and the rhythms on the two tracks are always a little out of phase with one another, creating interesting shifting meters. It goes on for a long time and doesn't hold the interest constantly, but it is not really supposed to. Like most of what was played that evening, it is not so much a piece of music as it is a kind of sound environment. You can drift into it and out of it at will. It never forces itself on you.

The next tape was very slow counterpoint played by instruments which sound like a cross between trumpets, saxophones, bagpipes, and foghorns. It has an extraordinary quality, and I was amazed to learn later that the sounds had been made exclusively with a tenor sax. By doctoring up the tape in relatively minor ways, the instrument had been transformed quite drastically.

The main piece on the program was the 45-minute tape used in "Ten 100-Inch Radii," a multimedia piece which includes a film, along with dance solos by Ann Danoff and Barbara Lloyd. Though I am curious to know what the whole piece would be like, I am rather glad that the film and dancers were not there that night, as I got into the music much more that way. And it stands by itself rather well. The tape was made with flute, violin, tenor sax, and voice, but here, too, one would be hard pressed to identify the instruments. They play mostly sustained sounds, hovering around an out-of-tune cluster for a long time. Gradually it seems to become denser, and expands to the upper register—the only piece of the evening which builds up in a dramatic way. The piece sometimes seems mournful, but I'm not sure why, because it is certainly very different from any dirge or lament I can think of.

The last piece on the program was "Voice Four." Here the sounds are easily recognized as voices, and they are beautifully blended to create an expanse of low-pitched vocal sound which seems to hover around the room just a few feet above the floor. And at a point near the ceiling, a good 30 feet from any loudspeaker, there is a little pocket of overtones. I moved around the room to make sure I wasn't just hearing things, but that little pocket of high sounds was always there in the same spot, as clear and vivid as if it had been coming directly out of a loudspeaker. It was a remarkable hallucination and a tribute to the profound mystery of acoustics—and perhaps also to the wine we had been drinking.

Niblock's tape music reflects his background as a film-maker in several interesting ways. He tends to think of music as accompaniment and is more concerned with its suggestiveness than with

its structure. His music has an undefined drifting quality much of the time, which leaves it vague and open to interpretation. As in radio plays, things are not spelled out in detail, and much is left to the listener's imagination. The tapes are seldom as captivating as most music created by composers, but they are often more evocative.

Because their art relies so much on technology, and because the technical standards are so high in their field, film-makers tend to place a higher value on technical perfection than composers do. This is certainly the case with Niblock, whose tapes are immaculately clean, very precisely recorded, and mixed with unusual care. He is also more concerned with the method of playback than many composers are. The loudspeakers were set up at very particular angles in very particular places, and the sound was quite uniform around the room.

Another big difference in Niblock's approach is in the area of pitch. When musicians collage sounds on tape, they usually get hung up on exact intonation. But Niblock obviously isn't concerned with this, and the resulting out-of-tune feeling is one of the things that gives his music unique and evocative qualities.

It is more and more common for artists to work in areas other

than their specialty. Not only do film-makers create music, but musicians do theatre pieces, theatre groups choreograph dances, dancers make films, and so forth. And almost every time an artist ventures out of his field of training, there are fresh insights of one sort or another. The term "multi-media" is not so fashionable any more, but there are probably more genuine attempts to integrate the arts today than there were then. I like to think that maybe someday there will no longer be such things as sculptors and composers and film-makers and playwrights and poets. There will only be artists.

—Tom Johnson