

nSFTMC@Soundings—Notes

The **San Francisco Tape Music Center** (SFTMC) is quite a notable and influential institution in the history of electronic and experimental music in the United States, and came into being through the efforts of a small group of composers working in the Bay Area who were looking to gather resources and create venues for their work. Today the names of those involved in its founding read as a list of luminaries of the American Experimental tradition: Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, Anthony Martin. The SFTMC began its life in 1961 as an improvised, cooperative studio in the attic of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music—made up of a pool of tape-composition equipment, no more than six audio oscillators and some tape recorders. By 1962 the SFTMC had found its way out of the attic to more suitable locations, eventually residing at 321 Divisadero where Steve Reich created his landmark *It's Gonna Rain* (1965). During this time there was also a relationship with Berkeley's KPFA, founded by Korean War pacifists in 1949 and famously investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee for "subversion". (Sound-poet, composer Charles Amirkhanian was Music Director of KPFA from 1969 to 1992—but as we shall see, this was after SFTMC had ended as an institution.) 1966 saw a relationship with the SFTMC and Don Buchla develop, which eventually lead to creation of Buchla's modular synthesizer. (Tonight we'll hear the fruitful outcome of that collaboration in Subotnick's music.) 1966 was also the end of the SFTMC through the acceptance of a grant for \$15,000 to become the Mills Tape Music Center (MTMC) at Mills College across the bay in Oakland. Pauline Oliveros became the first director of MTMC, which was eventually renamed the Center for Contemporary Music (CCM). But just year later, Oliveros had left MTMC, and all of the original SFTMC people had left by that time as well. And surprisingly by 1969, when Robert Ashley joined Mills as the new director of the center, the electronic music studios had been dismantled.

The **New San Francisco Tape Music Center** (NSFTMC) was created through many of the same dynamics that brought about the original SFTMC. I suppose I'll start where I arrive in Oakland in 1999, the heady days of the dot.com boom, looking to gather resources and create venues for my work and that of my contemporaries. My long time friend Matt Ingalls had been in the Bay Area from 1994, at first to study at Mills College and the CCM. He'd been involved in putting together a series of performances first known as the "East Bay Creative Music Festival" and later as the "Art Rattan Warehouse" in the East Oakland "live-work space" where Ingalls was living. Brian Cogley was the co-curator for these events. With a concert of tape music as part of this series of warehouse performances, April of 1999 saw the first incarnation of the NSFTMC—though at that time we still hadn't taken the name. The system consisted of a scraggly collection of hi-fi gear and a number of half-decent loudspeakers borrowed from San Francisco's Sound Traffic Control (where I was employed at the time). We played music mostly by Bay Area locals: Dan Joseph, Cheryl Leonard, Scott Looney, Jonathan Mitchell. All of these but Looney spent time at CCM, while Looney did work at Cal-Arts, where Subotnick is. We also played works by the members of the nascent NSFTMC: Kent Jolly, Ingalls, and myself. Lest I forget—for good measure Jonty Harrison was heard as well. Nearly a year later, we were invited to present a concert at the Big Sur Experimental Festival—at an outdoor venue along Highway 1, with steep cliffs and crashing surf just a bit over the rise. It wasn't until a few months later in July of 2000 that we actually took the name NSFTMC. This, for an event at a live-work performance space in an abandoned stamp factory in San Francisco called "The Delivery Room" (since closed down by SF police). We did ask Ramon Sender, Morton Subotnick, and Pauline Oliveros nicely, if we could use the name—the answer was "yes". For the record, music from one of Scotland's national treasures, Robert Dow, was played that evening to an enthusiastic standing-room only crowd. Since that event in 2000, NSFTMC has continued to produce concerts in every larger venues in the Bay Area, and to ever increasing and positive coverage in the local media. 2001 established the NSFTMC in its present form, with the addition of two more members, Thom Blum and Cliff Caruthers, who have been instrumental in NSFTMC's continuing success.

A Sky of Cloudless Sulphur (1978) is just one of the many works in Morton Subotnick's oeuvre to play with the metaphors of flight and the "Butterfly". (Subotnick capitalizes the word in his use.) Beginning in 1973 with a tape work, *Four Butterflies*, and the orchestra pieces *Two Butterflies* and *Before the Butterfly* (1974, 1975), Subotnick first explores the fluttering winged, Buchla synthesizer driven sound world of *A Sky of Cloudless Sulphur* in his work from three years previous, *Until Spring* (1975). Subotnick's other "Butterfly" and flight pieces include *Passages of the Beast* (1978) for clarinet and electronics, *The Wild Beasts* (1978) and *The Last Dream of the Beast* (1979) for tape, and for various chamber ensembles *After the Butterfly* (1979), *A Fluttering of Wings* (1981), *Ascent Into Air* (1981), and *And the Butterflies Begin to Sing* (1988). The "Butterflies" of *Spring* and *Sulphur* are heard in Subotnick's words as "a more subjective use of the metaphor than [in] any of the first three [works]," and I would suggest this is true for the latter as well. With *Sulphur* and *Spring*, the metaphor works "to provide the structural as well as subject material," which is apparent on first dizzy flutter.

The male Cloudless Sulphur (*Phoebis sennae*) is a lovely, solid-yellow butterfly with a wingspan of about 2.5 to 2.75 inches. The female can be yellow or white and has a brownish-black border. Both sexes have two small silver spots on the underside of their hind wings. The Cloudless Sulphur ranges throughout Southern California and the Southwest, east through the southern United States and south into Baja California and northern Mexico. I expect Subotnick knew the butterfly from his youth (and current residence) in the Los Angeles area. For *Sulphur*, Subotnick categorizes his "Butterfly" material into three "gestural qualities": "thrusting out. . . becoming. . . being." The last two sound rather Zen, and the first, possibly a bit Tantric—perhaps that should be expected from a pioneering composer working in California in the '70s. "Thrusting out" involves things like rising glissandos, increasing pulse rates and harmonic content, growth, and emergence. "Being", when it happens, is the goal and a cadential material—the arrivals at regularly pulsed textures, and finally repeated triads. "Becoming" is someplace between the other two "qualities".

I suppose it is partly for the notion of "becoming" that I've programmed *Sulphur* for this evening. The Nonesuch Records vinyl of *Sulphur*, with *After the Butterfly* on Side B, is quite nearly if not the first recording of electronic music that I actually owned—and had the opportunity to listen to again and again. . . and again. This was quite some time before I considered pursuing composition seriously and becoming a composer—though I had been playing with cutting up cassette tape (rather tricky) and constructing electronic circuits (rather shoddy). My own *Mpingo* (2003) opens with a brief fanfare that is somewhat reminiscent (stolen?) of Subotnick's fluttering *Sulphur* butterflies. Further on, the sound world of *Mpingo* is maybe more closely related to Subotnick's *Passages of the Beast*, as I started from recordings of Matt Ingalls improvising on bass clarinet. (All three of us are clarinetists, though for respect of "Music", I leave mine in its case.) Ingalls has, of course, long been a conspirator—and bears a certain amount of responsibility for damaging cassette tapes and "modifying" tape players for more musical playback results.

The title, *Mpingo*, refers to the tree called in English "African Blackwood", and names the dark wood of piccolos or clarinets. Like *Sulphur*, *Mpingo* is part of a series of works—and later we'll find Blum's *Japanese Postcard* is as well. Within the *Epiphanie Sequence*, *Mpingo* finds itself between *Kyai Pranaja* (1998) and *Pacific Slope* (2003), and so is perhaps something of a "becoming". The word I tend to choose is "transcendence", though, as I hope "Music" to be something of a mystical experience. *Epiphanie* as a whole is concerned with turning out and hearing the "inside" of musical sounds—to "show forth" harmonies and music usually unheard or ignored. Another dynamic of interest is performance and tape music's absent, ghostly performer. If asked what I do intend for *Mpingo*, I would allow myself: "That obscure shade is *Temps*, with all its sorrows and weariness. Then, there is the awakening of birds, a blackbird or nightingale improvises. And in fleeting moments, wind rushes through reeds—light, colours filtered through air. . . with advancing deserts, quantities decline. . . ."

Thom Blum names *Japanese Postcard* (1995) as the first in a collection of works he calls “audio postcards”. These include *Maroc* (1998) and *Note from Patzcuaro* (2003), but for my ear, I’d also throw in *five haiku* (2000) as a set of picture-postcards of San Francisco. All these sound themselves as somewhat narrative, somewhat abstract aural travelogues—made of field recordings: street scenes, markets, passing trains. . . and impressions there of. Along with such “profane” images, there is also a clear concern for the sounds of ritual, in Blum’s words, “the sacred life of the country” in question. And while the designation of “postcard” may imply something as inconsequential as “wish you were here”, Blum’s works should be thought of more as the thousand words spoken by a picture—and are much more detailed and introspective than a short, off-handed note to an absent friend or family member.

Japanese Postcard documents Blum’s impressions as a traveler to Tokyo, Hamamatsu, and Kyoto during the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. (I expect a number of these visits were made as part of Blum’s work with Yamaha, but we’ll have to ask him to be sure.) Similarly they are then filled with memories of and reflections on the visits after he had returned to San Francisco. Some of these moments of reflection are to be heard in the spaces between drumbeats. . . . Of the “audio postcards”, Blum says, “In general, my ‘postcard’ pieces are more documentary than musical but, of course, that opinion may vary from listener to listener depending on the ear of the beholder.” Fortunately Blum does allow a point of disagreement here—as having never visited Japan myself, I can only hear the music of these visits.

I would include Richard Karpen’s *The Other* (1992), along with Francis Dhomont’s tape works *Chiaoscuro* (1987) and *Novars* (1989), and Luciano Berio’s orchestral *Sinfonia* (1968) and *Rendering* (1990), as part of late 20th Century music’s “aesthetics of salvage”. Like Dhomont’s works listed above, *The Other* takes recordings of music in the western canon and builds a new work out these. If one chooses a nostalgic view point, an I’m apt to do so, this action can be compared to the work of the medieval stone mason building a cathedral out of the ruins of a Roman temple—a block of Monteverdi is re-carved by Dhomont as a new corner-stone. *The Other* likely has more in common with Berio’s *Rendering* than with the works of Dhomont mentioned, even though Dhomont is working in the same media as Karpen. *Rendering* is fragments of sketches of Schubert’s unfinished 10th Symphony filtered and melted through the ear of Berio, so *The Other* is a Symphony of fragments of Beethoven re-heard and re-sounded by Karpen.

While he is an artist rather than an archaeologist, Karpen does catalogue the marble blocks lifted from Herr Beethoven as “several short excerpts from the second and fourth movements of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, and a short excerpt from his Fourth.” Though, anyone familiar with Beethoven’s Symphonies will recognize these regardless of Karpen’s re-sculpting. Sol-La-Ti-Do sounds like Sol-La-Ti-Do, in any case. Karpen does allow for *The Other* to “be heard, in a sense, as a single variation on the combination of the various excerpts, which were stretched, shrunk, twisted, squeezed, transposed, counterpointed, and so on. . . .”

The other works heard this evening were either composed by artists working in the San Francisco Bay Area (Blum is in San Francisco, Subotnick worked in SF and Oakland—though *Sulphur* is from LA) itself, or on the West Coast of the US (*Mpingo* is from the time I spent on the family’s farm in Corvallis, Oregon—my primary residence at the time was in Oakland), *The Other* was written while Karpen was in residence at the Music Department of the University of Glasgow as a Leverhulme Trust Fellow. However, as Karpen lives in Seattle, Washington, and is a former student of Subotnick, I expect I can include him and his work as part of a “West Coast music”.

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nSFTMC@Soundings—Bios

Morton Subotnick (b. 1933, Los Angeles, CA, USA) is one of the United States' premier composers of electronic music and an innovator in works involving instruments and other media, including interactive computer music systems. Most of his music calls for a computer part, or live electronic processing, and his oeuvre utilizes many of the important technological breakthroughs in the history of the genre. The work that brought Subotnick celebrity was *Silver Apples of the Moon*. Written in 1967 using the Buchla modular synthesizer, this work contains synthesized tone colours striking for its day, and a control over pitch that many other contemporary electronic composers had relinquished. The exciting, exotic timbres and the dance-inspiring rhythms caught the ear of the public—the record was an American bestseller in the classical music category, an extremely unusual occurrence for any contemporary concert music at the time. The next eight years saw the production of several more important compositions for LP, realized on the Buchla synthesizer: *The Wild Bull*, *Touch*, *Sidewinder* and *Four Butterflies*. All of these pieces are marked by sophisticated timbres, contrapuntally rich textures, and sections of continuous pulse suggesting dance. In addition to music in the electronic medium, Subotnick has written for symphony orchestra (including *Before the Butterfly* a bi-centennial commission for the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony and the Cleveland Orchestra), chamber ensembles, theatre, and multimedia productions. Along with his well-regarded musical work, Subotnick is recognized as an important figure in American electronic music through his co-founding of the San Francisco Tape Music Center with Ramond Sender in 1961. Currently, Subotnick holds the Mel Powell Chair in composition at the California Institute of the Arts and co-directs both the Composition program and the Center for Experiments in Art, Information and Technology (CEAIT). He tours extensively throughout the U.S. and Europe as a lecturer and composer/performer, and is published by European-American.

As an adolescent, **Joseph Anderson** (b. 1970, Dayton, OH, USA) was inadvertently exposed to Edgar Varèse's *Poem Électronique* and the dangerous "music" and writings of anarchist John Cage. Since then he has been under the misguided impression that all sounds are likely music. Study with Russell Pinkston failed to disabuse him of this notion—which later led to his exile in the UK for a number of years where he studied the art in a post-industrial red-brick town with a Jonty Harrison, one of the masters. During his four years of exile, Anderson was a member of the Birmingham Electroacoustic Sound Theatre (BEAST). Since returning to the US in 1998, he has been active in the San Francisco Bay Area promoting this questionable "art of sound"—through the auspices of a collective of like-minded artists calling themselves the New San Francisco Tape Music Center. Recognitions for his "musical" efforts have included the "Grand Prix" from the 1997 Bourges Electroacoustic Music Competition for *Change's Music*, and he has been commissioned by organizations such as BBC Radio 3, and the UK's Society for the Promotion of New Music. Having recently left employment at Analog Devices' Audio Rendering Technology Center in San Jose, California as a signal processing engineer, he now finds himself as a lecturer at Hull University's Scarborough Campus—and as re-expatriated.

Thom Blum (b. 1954, Columbus, OH, USA) has been composing electroacoustic and computer music since 1972. His works have been presented in concerts, festivals and radio broadcasts internationally. He studied composition at California Institute of the Arts (1972-74), where his teachers included James Tenney, Ingram Marshall, and Curtis Roads. He established a curriculum in computer applications to music at The Ohio State University, under the mentorship of Thomas Whitney, Charles Csuri, and Thomas Wells (B.S., 1977). He is a Co-founder of the International Computer Music Association (1977), and served as Associate Editor for M.I.T. Press Journals Computer Music Journal (1987-1996). Residing in San Francisco since 1978, he has worked as an audio software engineer for LucasFilm/DroidWorks, a researcher and software architect for Yamaha Music Technologies, and is a Co-founder of Muscle Fish, a sound analysis and processing software company. Since 2001 he has been one of the co-directors of the New San Francisco Tape Music Center. In 2002-2003, he was named Artist for Lake Technology, Inc. (Australia) and was awarded a Huron sound spatialization system for his personal use in composing. Further information on Mr Blum and his music may be found at www.thomblum.com.

Richard Karpen (b. 1957, New York, NY, USA) is Director of The Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (DXARTS) at the University of Washington in Seattle. At the UW he is also Professor of Music and has been teaching composition and computer music there since 1989. Karpen's works are widely performed in the U.S. and internationally. He has been the recipient of many awards, grants and prizes including those from the National Endowment for the Arts, the ASCAP Foundation, the Bourges Contest in France, and the Luigi Russolo Foundation in Italy. Fellowships and grants for work outside of the U.S. include a Fulbright to Italy, Stanford University's Prix de Paris to work at IRCAM, and a Leverhulme Visiting Fellowship to the United Kingdom. He received his doctorate in composition from Stanford University, where he also worked at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA). He is a native of New York where he studied composition with Charles Dodge, Gheorghe Costinescu, and Morton Subotnick. In addition to Karpen's work in electronic media, for which he is primarily known, he has composed symphonic and chamber works for a wide variety of ensembles. Karpen is acknowledged as one of the leading international figures in Computer Music for both his pioneering compositions and his work in developing computer applications for music composition and sound design. Along with numerous concert and radio performances, his works have been set to dance by groups such as the Royal Danish Ballet and the Guandong Dance Company of China. Karpen's compositions have been recorded on CD by Le Chant du Monde/Cultures Electroniques, Wergo, Centaur, Neuma, and DIFFUSION i MeDIA. A forthcoming Centaur CD of his works will feature several leading international performers such as Garth Knox (viola), Stuart Dempster (trombone), and Jos Zwaanenberg (flute).