

Nicolas Collins is a composer-performer living in New York, who has toured extensively through the USA and Europe, both solo and as a member of David Tudor's "Composers Inside Electronics." He uses a mixture of simple com-

puter technology, found objects and home-built electronics. His music is available on the Lovely Music label and Trace Elements. His work, "Devil's Music", is being presented at NMA '86 on April 10, at The Orange Show.

Annea Lockwood is a well-known composer-performer, working with electronics, finding her sound materials in the environment, in her case, frequently the natural environment. She tours extensively and for the past

several years has taught at Vassar College, where she directs the electronic music studio. Her work "Three Short Stories and an Apotheosis" is being presented at NMA '86 on April 6 at Diverse Works.

**Composers and Their Work** *Annea Lockwood talks with Nicolas Collins*

*Nicolas Collins:* In terms of the materials I use, my approach has to do with notions of appropriate technology and recycling. It's a kind of ecological approach to materials and also subversion... subverting technology, using it for what it's not supposed to be used for, actually subverting musical materials, taking something normally used in one context and using it in another. As someone who has to work a daily job to support my musical career, I often have a limited amount of time to execute a musical work, and I'm no longer in a position where I can build a lot of complicated circuits from scratch. So, when I come up with an idea, I look around to see what approximates it, what's available. The commercial music industry is so huge, and electronics play such a large part in it that there's usually something around, something designed to fit the economic necessities of your

average rock and roll band that can be modified. In fact, as an aside, I think it's rather interesting that, whereas the avant-garde used to be at the forefront of sonic and technological experimentation, now, all of a sudden, the tide has turned. The example I always quote is John Chowning. He develops FM synthesis out at Stanford, thinks about it, works with it for years, but then Yamaha produces an FM instrument, the DX-7 synthesizer, that sells millions, and suddenly the people who are programming keyboards for rock and roll bands are miles ahead of a lot of avant-garde composers in terms of innovative sound design. My prediction for new music is that there'll be a return to an emphasis on musical structure, less dependence on technological innovation and less emphasis on just the invention of unusual timbres *Annea Lockwood:* Yes, because right now they're proliferating wildly, commercially, all the ROM packs stuffed with timbres.

*NC:* Having been trained to make maximal use out of the smallest amount of material - I studied with Alvin Lucier - I've always found it very difficult to *make* a sound. I suppose that's the result of that training, that you somehow have to justify why you would use a particular type of sound. And the way my musical aesthetic has developed is: Why make a sound when you can find one? That seems more responsible, unless you can really justify putting more noise out, which I find kind of difficult. So, I tend to re-use and modify material. Nothing new about that. A lot of what I'm doing has a strong tie to *musique concrete*. Only, it's done live rather than with tape manipulation.

*AL:* Well, that's been the whole trend since the sixties.

*NC:* Take "Devil's Music" (the work to be performed at NMA). That's a piece that uses live radio. It should always have one of those statements attached to it: "The Surgeon General warns you that all you hear is live and coming off the radio at the moment of performance." It has an element of risk attached to it. You're dependent on what comes off the radio at the time. In fact, there's a recorded version of "Devil's Music", where I sampled primarily dance music stations. It's very rhythmic material, because what I sampled was essentially sparse percussion and some electronic instruments playing bass lines. For vocals I took commercials and spoken material. But the sounds are absolutely glorious on it, and in a sense I'm totally irresponsible: I have no responsibility for those sounds, and friends of mine who were listening to the record would joke about, "Gee, you've got those amazing drum sounds...it must have been a \$50,000 recording project!" But that's sort of a statement of the times, that literally the only way I can get access to that sort of sonic richness is to steal it off records that have already been produced.

*AL:* Tell me about the score. What are the ground rules? Where are the open, risky areas?

Nicolas Collins



Bill Jacobson



Annea Lockwood

NC: Well, you have two modified digital delays, and they can be used to sample a very short amount of sound, less than a second. You find some material on the radio, hit a button, and it starts recording. The first delay you plug it into allows you to have a loop that it's always re-setting, partway through playback. So, instead of just going "and make hundreds of dollars, and make hundreds of dollars, and make hundreds of dollars," etc., it'll go "and make and make and and and make hun- and make hundreds hundreds...." That's the whole musical core of the piece, how that re-set has a sort of stuttering quality to it. Then you dump that first stuttering pattern into a second delay, which will loop in a periodic fashion a particular pattern from the first delay. So, you get these two delays phasing against each other. One is fixed and repetitive, but the other is always changing its pattern, so it doesn't come out sounding like "Come Out To Them." (Steve Reich). And because of what might broadly be called psychoacoustics, even though you only have two channels going on, you hear many more rhythms than in fact are there. Again, Steve Reich really discovered how much texture you can bring out from such a simple arrangement. In addition to the business of feeling that you have to have a really good reason to come up with a new sound, I still subscribe to the school of thought that there's something very nice and very musical about processes that you let go. You initiate an activity, and then you let it go. I'm not a purist. I don't make strict rules about working like "Well, once it starts, that's it for twenty minutes," but I like working like this as a way of defining the smaller cells in the structure of a piece. In other words, you have all these little rhythms taking place, and your first phrase, your first point of demarcation is "Let's load it up and let it go - Now!"

Show

(Thanks, Phil Harmonic) That becomes the structural level at which the performer is most intimately involved, rather than the moment to moment making of notes and beats. I'm very concerned with structure. So, where the piece becomes risky is of course that you never know what's coming over the radio. I have a rather cavalier attitude towards the actual material. I don't mind having pop music in there. A lot of people make a very clear-cut distinction between popular music and other kinds of material. As soon as they hear pop music creep into a piece of experimental music, they consider it debased or impure. AL: Don't you think that's changing though? NC: Oh it is, but you still find a resistance to it amongst certain people. I know out there there's a certain group of people saying, "You know, that piece would be so beautiful if all you did was speech." And it's true, there is something gorgeous about that, but I would just as soon walk back and forth between the more abstract element of speech, and something that really is our musical wallpaper. The only trick is that the piece (Devil's Music') has its own filtration. Some kinds of material work better than others. Speech is wonderful in it because, as every composer knows, speech rhythms are so complicated that if you double up those rhythms you get amazing patterns coming out. Easy listening and classical music work great. One of the things you can do with this system is allow one of the loops to slowly drift out of tune with the other. So, you get these lovely phasing and beating patterns, reminiscent of some Phil Glass or Terry Riley pieces. Very sparse dance music with isolated drum beats and isolated notes (from) electronic instruments works nicely. Hip-hop is fantastic, but for some reason, mainstream, "album oriented rock and roll" is very lacklustre when put in this kind of system, because it has a sort of uniform texture. It's actually the only thing that's really boring, and I don't mean to make a value judgement on the music,

but it's the way that this (technique) that I'm working with intersects with the rest of musical culture. It's the one thing it doesn't seem very adept at dealing with. AL: That's such an interesting criterion for sorting out different musics. It's so pragmatic.

NC: What really surprised me was that easy listening music sounds as good as it does. That, to me, was a real vindication of my philosophy, which is, if I can take elevator music and make it as interesting musically as anything else I might try to do, that, I feel, is a great achievement. That's like being able to turn corrugated cardboard into urban housing! When we're talking about the appropriation of technology and of musical material, one of the points I make in talking to people is that I'm doing very little that's new. Most of my ideas about what I'm trying to do in a piece are very traditionalist, in a sense. I'm a formalist and structuralist in terms of my focus, especially in performance. It's the demarcation of time...it's about structure and without intentionally trying to rip anyone off, many of my pieces are so deeply rooted in the traditions of what we are doing.....

AL: In the new music traditions? NC: Yes... What's Devil's Music' but "Imaginary Landscape" (Cage) meets "Kurzwellen" (Stockhausen) meets "It's Gonna Rain" (Reich)? I agree with something Paul Demarinis said a long time ago, that he'd rather see an old idea done well than a new idea just done. There's a lot out there to re-work that: my roots and my traditions as a new music performer.