

# Debut of Recital Forum For Bay Area Composers

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Youthful wings were tried Tuesday evening as the new Earplay series gave its inaugural concert in the First Unitarian Church. But Earplay's stated aim of bringing, "new life to the Bay Area contemporary music scene" failed to lift off the branch.

The hope is to establish a composer cooperative supported by dedicated performers, something along the lines of the old Composer's Alliance. New composers, mostly regional, would thus be given a forum for performance, free of the almost inevitable claque element of the competing ensembles.

Tuesday's opening was sensibly (and mercifully) short. Four pieces, mostly in the 10-minute range, were offered — three of these premiere performances. But instead of avoiding the pitfalls typical of all-modern programming, Earplay fell into its own pit, in a program of purely academic interest.

Richard Festinger's "Impromptu" (1985) for clarinet (Peter Josheff) and piano (Karen Rosenak) opened the evening. This was followed by David Lang's "Frag" (1985) for trio (Janet Kutulas, flute; Margot Golding, oboe; Maureen McSharry, cello), David Meckstroth's "Music for clarinet, viola and piano" (1980) — with Josheff, violist George Thomson and Eric Moe as pianist — plus Eric Moe's Variations for cello and piano (1985).

Cellist Laszlo Varga served as special guest soloist for the premiere of Moe's Variations, with the excellent Karen Rosenak as his pianistic partner. Here was the best performance of the program, for what amounted to its most substantial composition. Varga, always impressive, sounded in top form, fully committed to this piece — which he commissioned.

Like all four of Tuesday's works, the Variations are dedicated

to prolonging serial techniques of the 1960's. In Moe's particular case, one hears echoes of the early Elliott Carter music, especially the Cello Sonata and First Quartet. His is a softer grain of dedication to 12-tone music, in other words, which gives ground to purely expressive communication.

Formally, Moe's eight variations contained ample contrasts in texture as well as tempo shifts, creating a string of terse fantasies to be played without pause. In that sense, the piece suggested a kind of formal partita — movements on a theme, rather than "variations" in the normal sense.

The premiere of Festinger's "Impromptu" presented a curiously static clarinet part (most of long lyric phrases) over a distinctly hyper piano part. It began, it lasted and it stopped without ever having made a point or reaching a conclusion. What came through was mock Andrew Imbrie, but minus Imbrie's sense of form and momentum.

Meckstroth's single-movement "Music" offered a more severe manner. One heard a craggy ivory tower notion of post-Webern pointillism. (In his notes, the composer acknowledged Stefan Wolpe's influence, but what my ear picked up sounded more like minor Boulez.) Again, the music seemed so devoted to note and phrase construction, that the large line of progress died of neglect.

The largest surprise came with Lang's shallow "Frag" — Vietnam War slang for a fragmentation bomb. Indeed, it bombed.

What Lang turned out was a distinctly shabby parody of Cambodian folk dance, but with quasi-minimalist pretensions. As in Cambodian folk tradition, a more-or-less unison line is played by flute, oboe and plucked strings.

One sat amazed. High on the list of young Establishment composers, Lang has received all sorts of awards. He is currently on a Meet-the-Composer fellowship to the New York Philharmonic. Vietnam, minimalism at the folkloric level, post-serialism hints — well, it's all dreadfully yuppie chic isn't it? But art, poor darlings, it ain't.

What the concert amounted to was music by students or recently graduated students, for the most part played by performers at the same level — graduate student recital hour.