

EARPLAY a noble experiment

By Timothy Pfaff

SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

EARPLAY, the Berkeley-based new music presenting and producing organization, has its counterparts elsewhere, tirelessly performing the important and mostly thankless task of bringing new compositions before the public and, as important, seeing to it that worthy works receive successive hearings. Even so, at its concert at San Francisco's First Unitarian Church Monday night, the third and penultimate of its third season, "music in the MAKING," the EARPLAY musicians showed what sets them apart from many of their counterparts, at least locally.

First off, their cozy, congenial yet entirely serious concert format kept the focus on the music and off the performers' attitudes and fashions. Just as welcome was the fact the scores themselves didn't make victims of their listeners.

For strictly musical reasons it's a pity the audience was as predictably sparse as it was. Although none of the scores represented new music of the very highest caliber, all of the pieces warranted the scrupulous performances they received, and nearly all of them rewarded attentive listening. And together the attractive, agreeable works would have served as a powerful antidote to the new music phobia still epidemic among today's paying audiences. For anyone willing to expend a reasonable effort, Monday's concert was, decidedly, ear play instead of ear work (or ear bashing).

It's hard to imagine the listener who could have closed ears or heart to Janet Kutulas' deft, compelling performances of Eric Chasalow's two pieces for solo flute, "Falling Forward" (1979) and "Antichambers" (1980). The tours de force made unusual technical demands of the soloist, turned "extensions" of standard flute technique to musical ends and ventured into the world of microtones — somehow without fostering a single disagreeable sound.

Eric Moe, whose complete and thorough musicality is as unmistakable as it is unassuming, played central roles in the evening's two world premieres — as composer of "Songs and Dances of the Automobile" (1988), for digitally synthesized sound on tape, and as pianist in Peter Josheff's "Untended Variations II" (1987), that composer's first

work for solo piano.

Concert excerpts from the "soundtrack" of a forthcoming "living film"/performance art work, the 15-minute "Songs and Dances," is absorbing music on its own. Its ingratiating sonorities (the taped sounds have a gurgly, underwater quality) invite the listener into a complex musical world, which ranges from a discernible homage to Stravinsky to the evocation of everyday household (make that garage) noises, over its course finding musical cognates for a broad spectrum of psychological states and real-world phenomena.

At 19 minutes, Josheff's piano solo nearly outstays its welcome, cleaving to a fairly narrow range of keyboard expression that at times comes perilously close to noodling. But Moe's penetrating performance limned the harmonic events with care and made maximal effect of the work's occasional stylistic shifts. It remains open to question whether the piece would sustain interest (which it did Monday) in the hands of a lesser performer.

Josheff returned from his bows to play bass clarinet, superbly, in Scott Lindroth's "Relations to Rigor" (1986). The work, which plays live piano, flute, violin, cello and

percussion (as well as bass clarinet) off against a prerecorded electronic tape, achieves an intriguing balance between the instrumentalists' spontaneity and the innate (if also fixed) charms of the tape, which sounds a bit like a recording of toy instruments. Although the live players tended to move in a block in response to the tape, each had fleeting solo turns, Josheff's the most protracted, mysterious and beautiful.

The most perplexing, and on a single hearing the least gratifying, work of the evening was the last, David Froom's 1985 "Quartet for Piano and Strings," receiving its West Coast premiere. It seemed more bound than anchored by its form, and evinced little personality. J. Karla Lemon led the ensemble works expertly.