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25th and 26th June : Arts Laboratory
Newtown, Birmingham

"The Super Spectacular Symmetry Show" presented by
Birmingham Arts Laboratory Sound Workshop with
Embarkation

From 7.30. to 10.0. on two rather bleak evenings in Newtown, down near the canal, an interesting and successful event took place. This was the staging and performance of a programme of highly diversified visual and audio effects by the combined forces of the Arts Lab. Sound Workshop and Birmingham University's Improvisation Group, Embarkation. There was certainly a departure from the character of the music produced even by Embarkation's previous exploits within the university, whilst the Sound Workshop's contribution to the evening's programme was as provocative as it was startling. Perhaps the atmosphere of the Arts Lab. and its austere homeliness constituted one of the main reasons why the audience, as well as the performers, felt so keen a sense of involvement in what was, in any case, primarily a communal experience.

There were three items in what was, however, a continuous and interwoven pattern of sound and vision. The performance of "Night Music" from Stockhausen's collection of fifteen verbal pieces called "Aus den sieben Tagen" was followed by the central spectacle of the programme - the "Super Spectacular Symmetry Show". Finally, the evening drew to a peaceful, almost soporific close with a hearing of "Locations" in the version for tape alone by Jolyon Laycock, a music graduate of Nottingham University and director of the workshop. While seven members of Embarkation were joined halfway through their performance of "Night Music" by performers from the Sound Workshop, who gradually trickled in with the beginnings of the second item, the "Super Spectacular Symmetry Show", presented by the Arts Lab. performers, was supported by five members of Embarkation. The use of tape recorder alone in "Locations" was foreshadowed, meanwhile, by the role it

played as a broadcaster of intermittent snatches of vocal and orchestral music during the central item.

The "score" of the Stockhausen piece consists merely of a few sentences of instructions to the performers as a whole, yet the improvisations were interesting and varied, and there was a feeling of purpose and overall unity which was communicated quite spontaneously to the audience. Passages of great intensity seemed to alternate with moments of tranquillity. Already, in this first piece, the theme of the passing of time seemed to loom large, but it was not until the "Super Spectacular Symmetry Show" had got well under way that this really caught the attention of the listener and emphasise the elusive nature of time and its relentless, usually unobserved, march onwards. The arrangement of the visual effects in the evening's performance was highly original and certainly as important as the musical element. Two dustbin-like cylinders were suspended from the ceiling, while the focal point of the "set" was a large unit in black and gold, displaying two enormous clock-faces. These two clock-faces, together with a pendulum which swung from side to side in the middle of the performing area, constituted the main devices which so emphasised the passing of time. Further "ground-bass" elements were provided by human symbols.

In the centre of the performing area a girl sat with her back to the audience and rose at regular intervals to greet us with the words "A cup of tea, vicar?". Then there was the man on her left who recited, at intervals, the incomprehensible ingredients of some recipe or other. A pulpit-like scaffolding to her right, meanwhile, supported a character who uttered in various accents, languages and tones of voice Churchill's "Never in the field of human conflict....." There was also a cat. The purely musical, as opposed to verbal, element in the event was provided by two members of the Sound Workshop playing amplified electric harps, by Embarkation's Keith Potter on amplified piano and by other members of the group, playing more conventional instruments.

Perhaps some of the most intriguing, and occasionally moving, passages occurred when the live performance clashed with recordings of Sibelius or "My eyes have seen the glory" as they issued from the tape recorder - which eventually triumphed over the other sounds and visual effects, and was accompanied in "Locations" by nothing but the moving hands of the clock-faces. The whole performance, as I have described it, may sound self-conscious and contrived, yet, on the whole, it was spontaneous, gripping and thought-provoking and not "mannered" in any way. If I may be allowed a comparison with another piece in which visual and atmospheric "effects" play an equally vital role - the "Theatre Piece" by John Cage" - I would say that, insofar as such a comparison is valid, the performance under consideration was far more effective, atmospherically and as a unified whole, and that it augurs great success in the future, both for the Sound Workshop and for Embarkation.