

Musical Group Bows And Shows Its Promise

BY ROBERT COMMANDAY

A fresh group on the scene is producing new music of quality, no "isms," no "-ists," no radical adventuring, cross-overing or look-at-me tricks, just well written music an active listener can trust. It's called Earplay, which gave the second concert of its debut season Sunday at Stanford's Tressider Union (and repeated last night in the First Unitarian Church here).

Earplay is a composer-performer collaborative effort — collab would be an apt coinage — initiated by recent music alumni of UC Berkeley (mostly), gifted ones, to judge from the immediate results.

A remarkable piece for flute and piano stood out, Steven Mackey's "Crystal Shadows" (1985), in a convincing premiere by Janet Kutulas and Eric Moe. Of the many new works for the combination heard in recent years, this is both most original and musical.

"Crystal Shadows," written for the composer's flutist wife and himself, is a dialogue of shifting balance, though the flutist may have the best of it. The language is direct, the musical ideas clear and the development is consequential, emerging out of an extensive flute cadenza. In that, the flute even makes a new thing out of the old "Carnival of Venice" device of picking out isolated melody notes in the middle of a sequence of trills.

A key was Mackey's discrimination. He used only a couple of the new playing techniques, but integrated, not applied or salted over the music, as usually happens. The slap-key notes on the flute and "stopped" tones on the piano (hand-muting the string with one hand

while striking the key with the other) were thematic. Not for that reason, but for the consistent fantasy and craft, "Crystal Shadows" was a delight to hear. Mackey, 29, a composition and theory teacher at Princeton, has an impressive background, with five major awards and commissions — clearly, audibly merited.

Richard Festinger's selectivity and focus on the core idea similarly produced the finest of the eight songs in his cycle "Letters" and "The Weather of Six Mornings" (poems by Jane Cooper). Festinger's music found its own ways of extending the elegant character of Cooper's concentrated poems while escaping the regularity of their design (four couplets each). The last four songs reflected the poetry most particularly, as the piano shadowed and underlined the voice in songs 5 and 7 and, the final one, "Rest," revealing a touching sensitivity.

Judy Hubbell was the excellent soprano, joined in subtlety of the expression by pianist Karen Rosenak. Several of the songs do the modern thing of exploiting the singer's full range with wide leaps to the top, a few times too often, but Hubbell managed that well.

A nonet by Tamar Diesendruck entitled "Bright in Dark Directed" (1981, inspired by Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 43) offered a sensually appealing continuity, especially in the first of its three movements. There, as the musical line migrated through the texture, among the instruments, the play of color and shaping of melody reflected a fine touch and distinctive musicality. The players produced a skillful and refined performance, with J. Karla Lemon conducting.

Peter Josheff played his own "Untended Variations" (1985) for solo clarinet, an evocative work that had both a reflective spirit and the feeling of immediate performance. Frank Stemper's quintet "Chameleon" (1984), so successfully varied or, in his words, "camouflaged" the elements of his theme as it was being varied that I could not readily find its way or mine. As the best in Earplay's program demonstrated, nothing does it like following clear intentions clearly.