

# DATEBOOK

## ■ MUSIC

# Earplay Group Shows How Far It Has Come

BY ROBERT COMMANDAY

**T**he new music ensemble Earplay was doing well Monday as it continued to pursue the venerable do-it-yourself tradition. Since Beethoven and before, composers have regularly created their own performance platforms. Each generation and each attempt has had to find and work out the unique setup that would best serve its needs and provide a proper hearing for the music.

At the midpoint of its second season, Earplay has come a good distance. Monday's program in the First Unitarian Church consisted of four works that had something musical to say and reached out to say it. Three were premieres and there was not an academic, experimental or hypothetical construction in the lot. Only one thing held them back — the "reaching out" was a quality evident in the works themselves, but not sufficiently in the performances.

One work, by the well-known San Francisco composer Wayne Petersen, was an emphatic success — a piece with a sense of real immediacy. A supporter and adviser but not a member of the Earplay consortium, he had composed the quartet "Labyrinth" for the group. Petersen's musical ideas are distinctive and he keeps them recognizable as changes are wrung on them. He is not afraid to let the music tap its foot rhythmically in recurrent stretches that change the pace of the activity.

Petersen's considerable craft is everywhere apparent — in the fascinating color combinations he makes of the flute, clarinet, violin and piano, in the unflagging rhythmic vitality and energy, in the momentum and sure aim. Petersen drew a bead on the ending and there he went.

Genuine rhythmic value — that is, rhythm operating at deep levels — was common to the three ensemble works on the program. Richard Festinger's "Ontogenesis" (1978) for quintet (the same quartet used for "Labyrinth" plus a cello) was music in constant change, the texture open, the piano playing a dominant part. It had an expressive melodic impulse that seemed to spring from vocal utterance, and the sound was fresh. More might have happened if the solo leads had been played with

more commitment.

While the Earplay musicians are competently skilled — as they would have to be to produce music of this intricacy so accurately — some are still restrained and cautious.

That carefulness produced a clean but insufficiently eventful performance of a work moved by dramatic imagery, Eric Moe's "Byzantium" (1987), for baritone and octet. Moe, the excellent pianist in the Petersen and conductor for this work, is a gifted composer currently on the San Francisco State University faculty. "Byzantium" is a setting of the vivid Yeats poem, its visions and fantasies reeling in an almost intoxicating sequence.

The mystical and elusive, intense yet rhapsodic mosaic-word-pictures of Yeats' language both defy pictorializing and call for music with emotional overtones. Moe's music produced a rich and dark fabric with a vocal part that carried a sense of transport or ecstatic vision.

It might have projected more of that quality had the fine baritone, Allen Shearer, been better positioned, forward on the stage, and in memorized possession of the score. The dominating or leading performance necessary lies well within his power, just as the part suits his dark and rich voice. "Byzantium" promises to be a stirring piece when its dramatic quality is let out.

Tamar Diesendruck, a regular contributor on Earplay concerts, was represented this time by two solo violin "Etudes" (1987) of a projected set of five. These are whimsical or tongue-in-cheek studies of a sort which come off best or only if the player does them with commanding ease. Martha Simonds gave them well-studied performances.

The first, "Fast Glass," would seem to fool around with minimalist patterns (Phillip Glass' music is an acknowledged source and target of this) but is freer and asymmetric. It sounds as if folk fiddle was really what Diesendruck had in mind. She also went out of her way to comment satirically by means of some deliberately harsh, slow scraped sounds. "Cartoon" was a study in glissandi, sliding sounds every which way.